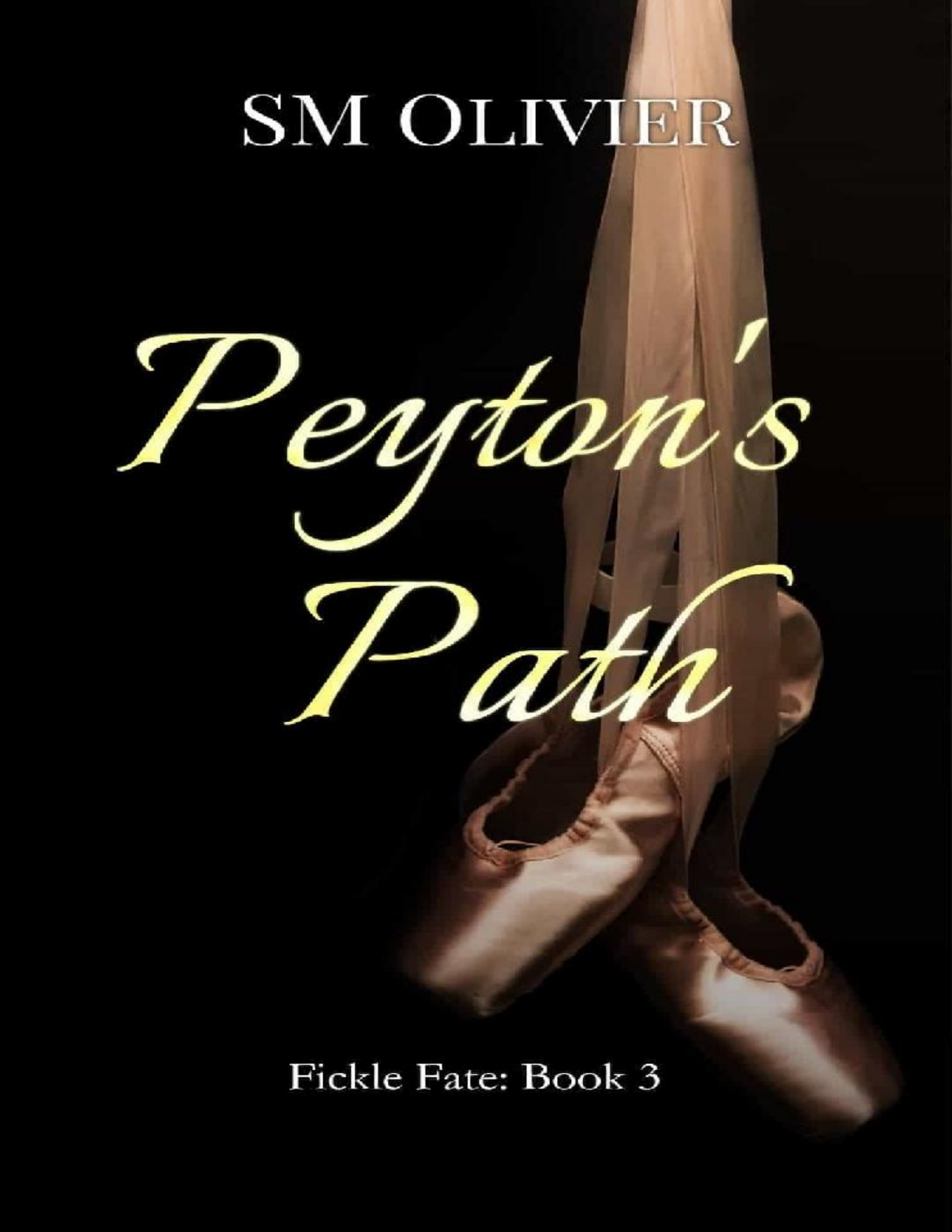
SM OLIVIER

Peyton's Path



Fickle Fate: Book 3

Peyton's Path

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S.M. Olivier

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Synopsis

After my return, I hadn't realized how many people would assume they had a right to invade my private life. Now I struggle with nightmares and anxiety, and I have to constantly be shadowed to ensure my safety. To make matters worse, people from the past, both mine and the guys', make an appearance back into our lives, stirring up an old history of hurt. They think they have a right to, after abandoning us like yesterday's trash. I just wish they'd become history again and stay that way.

Not all is bad, though. My relationship with the guys is stronger than ever. I still have my escape with dance. Plus, an opportunity I thought long passed comes knocking on my door once more. I'm getting better, and more importantly, I'm not alone.

But I know how fickle fate can be. Just when you're finally catching your breath, fate steps up behind you to throw you back into the fire, whether you're ready or not.

Well, I've got news for fate: the fire just makes me stronger.

Fickle Fate is the next installment in the Peyton's Path series.

Dedication

This is for all the teachers who have inspired their students to paint stories with their words. Ms. Chaffee and Ms. Woodward, you made an impact on my life. Thank you!

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The New Norm

“Can you hand me that 3/16 socket?” I asked Crew.

He wordlessly handed me the socket, and I attached it to my ratchet.

“Thanks,” I murmured as I tightened the nut back onto the frame of my bike.

Today, Crew had skipped school and stayed home with me. It had been one week and four days since my return, but who’s counting? Just kidding, I was. There wasn’t a day since my return that one of them hadn’t stayed home with me.

Grandpa tried to convince me to move in with him during my recovery, but his house was already full of “mending” people. Plus, I still couldn’t face Ava knowing what I knew now. She had given Coach, Principal Boyd, and Tormentor the hair-brained idea to take me. Sure, they didn’t and shouldn’t have listened to her, but she was insane enough to provide them with the suggestion.

Crew, Golden, and Kyler were furious that she might not face any jail time. Currently, she was staying at a glorified mental health facility. Her doctors didn’t think she was mentally capable of handling any jail time, especially since she denied collaborating with my abductors.

Since Coach was the only person caught, he maintained that Principal Boyd had abducted me and that Tormentor was never there. He also insisted that Ava never knew about our existence. The prosecutors may not be charging her, but Grandpa did have her in counseling. I guessed that was something.

The state had awarded temporary custody to Grandpa in the meantime. It had been proven that Chastity and Charity didn’t share the same DNA as Ava or Grandpa. However, since they were considered siblings of Gideon and Honor, and Grandpa had the means to support them, they would remain in his care. If Ava was

ever released, she would still have to go through parenting classes and reunification therapy with her children.

They were still trying to determine where the twins' mother went. Ava informed the authorities that their mother was Violet. She told them that Violet had a relationship with Coach and Principal Boyd of her own volition. But the DNA, of course, contradicted her claim.

According to her, Violet had left shortly after the twins were born because she no longer wanted to be with the men. I told the authorities what I had been told. According to Aaron, his mother had died giving birth to the twins.

He led me to believe that she had been buried in the back. A search had been conducted, and no bodies of a young woman surfaced. In addition, there had been no missing reports filed on a redheaded woman by the name of Violet in the past ten years. This was the period between Ava running away and now.

"Jump on," Crew bade me as he finished securing my new tire in place.

Kyler, Crew, and I had spent hours working on my bike. Luckily, my new fuel pump and tires came in yesterday afternoon so that we could install them today. The guys and I were going to take a road trip today when the other guys got off school and work. We were heading up to Da's shop.

The shop might've no longer participated in the business' reality television part, but Da's shop was still up and running. I was kind of surprised and shocked to realize that the guys inherited the business. They had a business manager and long-time friend still running the very lucrative business, enabling them to still collect from it with little-to-no hand in it.

I jumped on my bike and whooped in happiness when it roared to life. "Let's take a ride," I said excitedly.

Crew grinned at me and placed a quick kiss on my lips. "Put on something warmer."

He had become so bossy since my return. I didn't take offense to it. They all seemed to be protective of me since I returned. And I knew why. They would never know fully what I had gone through, but they had suffered their own fears and worries in my absence.

Physically, I was almost one hundred percent back to normal. I became exhausted a lot faster than I wanted to, but it was a start. I even started dancing again, at home, just the other day. It had been almost five days since I hadn't needed a nap or two to get through the day.

I still woke up in the middle of the night in cold sweats, expecting to wake up in that wooden box. It took me several moments to remind myself of where I was and that I was safe. Relatively. But I didn't think I could get through a night without one of the guys by my side.

"I'll be right back!" I crowed before opening the door.

For the last twelve days, Crew, Kyler, and Zane had moved in with the Isaacs. We didn't want to be separated, and the house had more than enough room for all of us. It was a huge plus that none of the vultures, reporters, had been able to come in contact with us yet. It seemed every media network wanted an exclusive interview with me, but there wasn't even the smallest part of me that desired to do so. I wanted—no, I *needed*—my privacy.

I had been heralded as a hero, but I didn't feel like one. I survived a horrible ordeal and was able to help my cousins and half-sister, but that didn't make me a hero. I was a survivor if anything.

The guys had to field a lot of people and visitors. On the third day of harassment, Lochlann had a company come in and install a gate at the mouth of the driveway. I didn't want to talk to the media, and I had kept who I wanted to see− outside of my immediate *family*− to a very limited number.

The only person outside of my family I had seen was Renee, Mr. Jenkins, and Anya. I didn't want to see anyone else. I didn't even want Lucas' company until tonight. He was going to meet the guys, the kids, Renee, and me at an empty rental that Mam and Da had owned near the shop.

The person who surprised me the most out of this whole ordeal was David. He was here nearly every other day. All of a sudden he wanted to get to know me. He wanted to repair a barely salvageable relationship. If he hadn't dropped out of the race for mayor and hadn't seemed to mean so much to Grandpa, I would have told him to beat feet.

As it was, he had come to visit me five times since my return, and I reluctantly had to admit our blood tie was strong. I even seemed to have picked up a few of his mannerisms and “likes,” despite the fact he hadn’t raised me.

In my eyes, I thought his only redeeming quality was the fact he hadn’t tried to buy my affections; he genuinely seemed to want to get to know me. Despite the fact that Catherine, my stepmother−kind of, sort of? What *do* you call the woman who was your biological father’s wife?−seemed angry and upset that David was trying to build a relationship with me.

I quickly changed into a Henley, jeans, riding boots, and a leather jacket. Admittedly, it was a little too chilly for any sane person to ride a bike this time of year, but I’d never claimed I was sane, especially as of late. The new heated seat and grips that the guys had purchased and installed played a significant factor in my decision to ride despite the weather.

Right before I left my room, I grabbed a thicker scarf. Scarves were a daily accessory, except when I slept. The ugly scarring around my neck, where the prongs and collar had tug into my flesh, was still very noticeable. The guys tried to convince me otherwise. However, the scars on both my neck and arms were a daily reminder of what I had been through. I despised that reminder.

Crew was waiting for me right outside my side door with both bikes. I didn’t even think I had been gone that long.

His bike had needed a little repair work done to it as well, so we had worked on my bike and his. His was a beast in size and could go a lot faster than mine, but I still loved my bike. The gift from the guys had been one of the most thoughtful ones I had ever received. In fact, my whole last birthday was what Hallmark movies were made of. Too bad it was followed by what Lifetime movies were made of.

“Where to?” He smiled at me as I took my helmet from his hands.

“Anywhere.” I smiled in return before slipping my helmet into place.

I started the bike and smiled wider when I heard it rumble to life. The vibration between my thighs was a foreign feeling. I wouldn’t have thought a whole month of not riding could affect me so much.

Crew darted forward on his bike, and I followed. I was still smiling, so hard my face hurt. I almost forgot how good it felt to smile without the burden of my ordeal hovering over my head like a dark cloud. Even the fact that we were being followed couldn't dash away my euphoric feeling.

My *Shadows* weren't going away anytime soon. Despite all my protests and the fact that this was technically the first time I even bothered leaving the property, I knew they were an unnecessary "evil."

Cooper− Coop− and Salvatore− Sal− were my newly appointed bodyguards. I may not have wanted them here, but I knew they were there to stay. Grandpa and David insisted they remain with or near me at all times. They had become my shadows over a week ago, and we had come to, somewhat, of an understanding.

They stayed out of sight, though, and I made sure they got three meals a day. I even refrained from binge-watching reality television that they weren't crazy about, like Dance Moms and the teenage pregnancy shows. I knew those shows were over-the-top dramatic, mind-numbing, and brain fodder, but since I had very little to do during the days after my schoolwork was complete, plus napping and cooking, I needed something to keep the dark thoughts away.

Crew turned left, so I did as well. He seemed to understand my need for speed, because he opened his bike up. I realized he was holding back when he got the tach up to one hundred. I knew my Harley Sporster could go faster, and he could definitely go quicker, but this was a comfortable speed to cruise.

I could hear Soop− the blended moniker I had given Sal and Coop− honking at us. I knew they were trying to make us slow down; I had no desire to, though. We weren't harming anyone.

We were on the back roads, and almost everyone that traveled this long stretch of secluded road were locals. Most of whom were either at work or school, so my usual caution was thrown out the window. We weren't a danger to anyone but ourselves. In fact, this was doing wonders for my emotional and mental health. The feeling of flying and watching the trees and blacktop whiz by was damn near euphoric. I laughed, my wild laughter ringing in my ears, and rolled the throttle forward.

I looked in my mirrors and noticed Coop yelling at us, while Sal laughed like he was highly amused. If they were both books to judge their covers by, I would assume Coop would be a mellow, laid-back guy. He had an open, friendly face. He was slightly above average height. He was fit, given his profession and past military experience. He had sandy blond hair that had cowlicks, both in the front and back, that couldn't be tamed no matter how much product he probably put in it. His eyes were a calming, gray.

His partner, Salvatore, was nearly as tall and big as Crew and Kyler. He had a face made of granite. His hair was dark brown, almost black, his skin a dark bronze color, and his eyes matched his very dark hair. He looked like he could eat nails for breakfast and crush glass cups with a clench of his meaty fist.

So, looking at both of them, you would assume Cooper was friendly, outgoing, and free-spirited, and Sal stoic, intense, and stiff. It was far from the truth. Cooper was severe, too stern at times, and Sal seemed to handle life with laughter.

Crew continued making our turns and leading me to some of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. I had done a little sightseeing in my new home since arriving, and Crew seemed to know that.

We were riding for a good hour before he began to slow. He indicated that we were turning, and I saw our destination up ahead. It looked like a little podunk diner, with advertised homemade meals on the marquee.

From my experience, their version of homemade was thawed meals made weeks− sometimes months− in advance. Sometimes they bought their menu items from a can or prepackaged, adding a few of their own "fresh" ingredients, attempting to pass them off as homemade meals.

Crew parked his bike first, and I parked mine right beside his. I climbed off and immediately noticed the phantom shaking in my limbs. It felt like my whole body was vibrating still, and I *loved* it!

I promptly embraced Crew. "That was freakin' amazing!" I laughed.

He chuckled and embraced me back. "It really was. I forgot how much I missed riding. I'm thrilled you convinced me to

troubleshoot my baby. Now, let's go in and get some grub."

He paused as if a thought had just occurred to him and pulled out his phone. His fingers flew over the keyboard before he stuffed it back into his pocket. I had to stifle a laugh. He was never big on words, verbally or technology-wise.

He led me towards the trailer-like diner. I scrunched up my nose, knowing this could go one of two ways: they would have really fantastic food, or they'd have barely-edible food.

"I know it doesn't look like much," Crew said, interpreting my look. "But the food here is amazing. I know we already had breakfast, but their potato pancakes and corned beef hash are my favorite. If you want lunch, their burgers are fresh and attract people all over the state. Whatever the season, the beef is addictive. And their shakes! Their shakes are all freshly made with ice cream to order, not any of that liquid machine crap."

I laughed. Crew and Paxton ate like any typical teenage boy. The amount of food they could put away was sickening at times. My appetite was finally returning after nearly two weeks of picking at my food like a damn bird because my stomach was too weak and had shrunk down immensely.

"I'm hankering for a burger," I said with a decisive nod. "However, the shake will have to wait until after a few cups of coffee."

Now that my butt was off my heated seats, and my leather gloves weren't gripping my new heated grips, the autumn air was seeping into my skin. I had only put on four pounds since my return, so I was at least fifteen pounds under my ideal weight. It was surprising what those extra pounds could do in the way of natural insulation.

"You're cold." He frowned, and I knew he was blaming himself.

"Stop," I gently admonished him. "I'm having fun and I'll warm up."

"Maybe we can get Ky to pick us up after we eat," he suggested.

I shook my head adamantly and grasped both of his hands. "Please," I pleaded softly. "Don't take this away from me."

He must have understood the words I was unwilling to speak. I didn't need to remind him that I felt like I was constantly in a vast ocean. Sometimes I floated along and went through the motions of life. The guys would float by and try to throw me a lifeline, and sometimes I nearly forgot that there was no land in sight. Other times, I felt as if I were being dragged beneath a strong undertow. The kind of undertow that filled my lungs with salty water and threatened to choke any life left in me. It was rare that I felt like I was riding the waves and basking in the adrenaline of a successful ride.

He nodded and pulled me towards the diner. "Let's get some coffee."

I knew his natural instincts were to protect me and insist that we call Kyler to come to pick us up with his truck. However, the other part of him recognized that indulging me was beneficial to my mental and emotional health. There were very few things that excited me nowadays, and this was one of them.

I wasn't completely ignorant of my mental fractures. I recognized them. I just didn't know how to make things "better." I had stared a thousand times at the card Dr. Bryce Baylor had given me two weeks ago. I just hadn't attempted making a call to the therapist he'd recommended to me.

The guys encouraged me. Lochlann tried to use his training on me. I was just too afraid to speak about what happened to me. After my initial interview with the FBI, I was reluctant to say anything. I hated reliving the most terrifying and painful part of my life. It was bad enough that nearly every other breath I inhaled was accompanied by a memory I wished I could lock away for the rest of my life.

The tinkling of the bell above the door resounded in the packed space. Nearly every booth and table were filled, despite the location of the diner. I knew Business 101 was location, location, location, and I would have never believed that it could be so busy. Its location wasn't ideal and far off the beaten path. It shocked me how busy they were, especially at noon on a Friday.

It was a bit rundown and in dire need of some TLC, but it was clean. The waitresses wore cute retro red and white pinstripe

uniforms with white aprons. They also wore matching caps to complete the look.

“Seat yourself, hun,” an older woman said with a welcoming smile as she bustled past with two carafes of coffee.

Crew linked our hands together and pulled us towards an empty booth, past the bar-like seating. I followed him and looked at the daily specials posted on the blackboard above the order window. My eyes caught on a stuffed burger that had jalapenos, bacon, and cheddar cheese.

I immediately knew that I would order it, along with the loaded french fries and a banana milkshake. After coffee, of course.

I noticed how Crew chose the diner’s back corner, where it was less crowded and had a couple of open tables nearby. Instinctively, I knew he was conscious of my newfound phobia of crowds and people. I silently exhaled as I noticed no one seemed to be tracking our arrival or gave us a second glance.

We had barely sat down before Coop came storming into the diner, Sal sauntering in slightly behind him.

“Are you trying to get us fired?” Cooper growled as he hovered over our table.

Crew immediately stood back up and straightened to his full height. “I suggest you settle down. I texted you when we got here. She will always be safe with me, and I will protect her with my life. Grandpa Delaney was already aware of our ride. Your job was never in jeopardy.”

I frowned slightly. I knew all these new measures were there to protect me, since Tormentor, AKA Pearce Webber, was still out there somewhere. Despite Coach’s testimony, the FBI had investigated my claims. Unfortunately, Pearce Webber had an alibi with his wife and two children. They even interviewed Percy Webber, his identical twin brother, and he was in court for several days last month, giving him an alibi.

“Is the food any good here?” Sal asked.

I feigned a smile, realizing he was trying to break the tension between the two very headstrong men.

“I heard they have good corned beef hash, potato pancakes, burgers, and shakes,” I answered.

It had taken me at least four days to even speak to my bodyguards. I had felt so claustrophobic and censored with them continually hovering. When the guys tried to show me affection, I felt like I couldn't be free, afraid of Sal and Coop's judgment. Not everyone was understanding of our arrangement.

I understood their presence was supposed to comfort me; instead, it made me feel like I was always under a microscope. It took Lochlann intervening to finally give me some breathing room. He made them understand they didn't need to follow me in and out of every room or check every room before I entered it.

"If you like homemade chicken and dumplings, Aunt Bea just made some," a pretty young girl, maybe a year or two older than me, answered as she appreciatively eyed the three men.

I barely refrained from rolling my eyes as I noticed her beautiful peach complexion on display, including her generous cleavage, her arms, her neck. I self-consciously tugged my sleeves down and made sure my scarf was still firmly in place.

I never realized how much skin could mean to me. This was only the second time I had left the property since I'd returned. And the same feeling of inadequacy was threatening to choke me. I knew it would be some time before I could ever go out in public with my skin on display. I was afraid of the disgust I could see in other people's eyes. Or worse, their pity.

"Mmm, I do love me some chicken and dumplings," Sal groaned appreciatively before sinking into the booth nearby.

Like Crew, his presence in the intimate seating was evident. They both took up nearly the whole booth with their larger-than-life physique. I was thankful Sal was giving us some semblance of privacy by not sitting with us.

"I'm Summer, and I'll be your waitress today. Can I get y'all started with a drink?" the waitress inquired as if two men weren't still standing toe to toe, glaring each other down.

"Coffee, black," Coop stood down first, concisely speaking as he took the seat across from Sal.

"I'll try a chocolate peanut butter milkshake with a glass of water," Sal said jovially.

The big oaf was really growing on me. How he was rumored to be a “killing” machine was beyond me. How the DOD hired him as a secret service agent− once upon a time− was mystifying. How did he pass the interview process?

“Coffee,” Crew grunted.

“Coffee and water for now, and a banana milkshake for when my meal comes, please,” I stated. “And can you make sure my Shadows are put on our bill?”

I heard Coop scoff, and Sal began to chuckle. Crew covered a snort of laughter. I smiled behind my hand, glad my ploy worked. I could see I confused Summer, but her customer service smile soon covered it up.

Although they were paid generously, I still felt somewhat responsible for them. That and I knew Coop would hate my insistence on paying. It took him some time to agree to eat what we were eating at the house. Sal wasn’t as hard to convince. After seeing him eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches three times a day for three days straight, I couldn’t take it any longer. I insisted they eat what we were eating, even if they didn’t sit with us at times.

Just as I suspected, Coop began to protest but was quickly shut down by Crew. “I’ll take the bill,” he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Coop knew a losing battle. Crew and Kyler had no problem speaking up for me and putting Coop in his place when needed. Lochlann and Zane were more diplomatic about it all, of course. Golden and Paxton almost seemed neutral.

“Three coffees, two glasses of water, and a chocolate peanut butter shake coming right up,” Summer chirped.

“Shadows?” Coop inquired the moment she walked away.

“Shh, shadows don’t talk,” I admonished him before I linked my hands with Crew’s over the table.

Sal guffawed with laughter while Coop scoffed once more.

“Thank you for today and all your hard work on my bike.” I smiled at Crew.

He was silent for a moment before he picked up one of my hands and kissed the back of it. “I would do it over and over again to see that smile on your face.”

I frowned for a moment. It was hard to smile nowadays while my mind was crowded by fear, pain, memories, and insecurities.

“I’m trying,” I say quietly.

“And no one’s rushing you,” Crew gruffly said, obviously displeased by reminding me of my mood of late.

“And that’s why I lo− like you so much,” I quickly amended my words.

Was it too early to “love” them? How do you measure your feelings? Was it time? Was it tons of little gestures that added to the final “ah-ha” moment? I didn’t know. I never loved one man before− save Lucas, but he didn’t count − let alone six.

All I knew was that they had all wormed their way into my heart for different reasons. I knew I loved them when I was abducted. However, I didn’t want to be the first one to utter the words. I would wait for them.

I didn’t want to be rash in my decision or my words. I knew the guys made me happy. I knew they were helping me in my recovery progress, that they had always been there for me. An accurate measure of a person’s character could be measured on how they reacted and behaved when you were at the lowest point of your life. Each one of them had shown me they were men I wanted by my side. Even Golden, despite my distrust of late.

Golden was still on rocky ground with me, but I knew he was trying to prove that he and Madison hadn’t ever been an item. Though there were a lot of little moments I felt like he was genuinely vested in *us*, there were still times I had my doubts.

“Ditto,” Crew said with a slight smirk on his lips. I knew he had caught my faux pas and was allowing me to pretend I’d meant something else.

“I feel overwhelmed at times,” I admitted to him quietly. “It’s hard to even try to smile.”

“You’re strong, and I know you’ll find more reasons to smile as each day passes,” he said firmly.

I nodded and looked down at our interlocked hands. I watched as Crew bent down to brush his lips across my hand, his hair falling into his eyes and face endearingly. He looked up, conviction in his gaze.

I could see the confidence he had in me. I could see his unspoken agreement to help me through this. I could see his unwavering faith in my strength of character.

I knew I was strong. I lost count of how many times I had been knocked down in life. Sure, I had pulled myself up several times. Only this time, I had a formidable support system to make sure I stayed up. However, I was daunted by the task ahead.

I took a deep mental breath in.

Baby steps— one foot in front of the other. The mountain I had to climb was a tall one, but I wouldn't ever reach the top unless I kept moving.

So, I nodded at Crew and smiled.

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Notoriety

Over lunch, Crew quizzed me over our mid-term English exam, effectively distracting me from my thoughts and emotions. My teachers were reluctant at first to give me any of my schoolwork. They wanted to give me the time to catch up, but after four days of being locked up in the house, I knew I needed something to keep my mind busy.

I threw myself into my schoolwork, even on weekends, and I had finally caught up yesterday. Without all the school distractions, I had come to the realization that I could complete assignments quicker, even with my mindless reality shows playing in the background.

Grandpa tried to hire me a tutor for the rest of the year. I refused it. I didn't want or need another stranger in my life. Plus, I was confident I could catch up rather quickly. I only had three classes, for Pete's sake. Calculus was rough, but there were many aids my teacher pointed me towards, and Zane was an immense help.

I gasped when I finally checked my vibrating phone. "Woah, look at the time!"

I noticed several missed texts. We were supposed to leave in less than an hour, and I hadn't even packed yet. It was so unlike me, but honestly, up until this morning, I wasn't sure I was ready to leave the house yet.

Sure, we had planned it, and it was for my bike, but after my return, I never would have thought I would be agoraphobic. I had a panic attack the last time I left the house, and I was afraid to have a repeat. It was embarrassing and terrifying, and it only amped up my anxiety levels higher.

If it weren't for Amazon and grocery stores that delivered, I was pretty sure we'd be living off of take-out. The one and only time I

sent the guys to get my grocery list ended in a slight headache. They had to go back two more times before they got it right, and I hated being a burden.

I sent out a quick group text.

Peyton: Sorry, time got away from me. I'm good. Crew and I got my bike running, so we decided to go for a ride and eat. OMW.

I didn't even wait to see their individual responses before I slipped my phone back into the inside of my jacket pocket.

"Let's go," Crew stood and held out his hand to help me.

I grabbed his hand, and as we made our way out, I could hear the first whispers.

"I'm pretty sure it's her. It has to be her," a woman's voice said adamantly.

I tensed up, knowing they were talking about me. Crew seemed to have heard, too, because he immediately moved me in front of him and walked stiltedly to protect my back and keep me in the curve of his body.

The aisle to the door was narrow, so it made it awkward to walk this way. My legs weren't nearly as long as his.

"Peyton Delaney," I heard my name being called by an unfamiliar voice moments before a hand came out and wrapped around my upper arm.

Both Crew and I were so startled that I tripped over Crew's foot and was falling unceremoniously in the direction of the hand that pulled on me.

Suddenly, I was nearly face-to-face with a man I had never met. The pungent smell of alcohol hit my nose first before my gaze fell on a pair of muddy brown eyes. I immediately began to tremble, and my mind started shutting down.

"You need to tell the cops the truth, girlie," he drawled in a backwoods accent. "Coach Stephen Carson is an honest, upstanding member of this community. He would have never taken any girls and bred them like dogs. He has coached and raised hundreds of good men. Who are you to accuse him of all the lies?"

The sheer hatred and disbelief were like a slap in the face. One second I was blinking in confusion and fear at the stranger, and

the next second, Crew had his hand wrapped around the man's throat, slamming the man's head into the glass window behind him.

"That man was a pedophile and a deviant," Crew growled.

I heard a scuffle to my right and noticed both Coop and Sal had his companions restrained as well.

"I told you that was her!" a woman's voice exclaimed.

"Peyton, look this way," an adolescent voice called out to me next.

I looked up and noticed all eyes were on me. As a performer, you would think I was accustomed to being the center of attention. This attention was entirely different, though. I felt like a freak. So many people were privy to the torture I had been put through, thanks to a loose-lipped nurse.

Suddenly, people believed they had the right to know every nitty-gritty part of my life. And not just what I had suffered at the hands of my kidnappers. The absence of my mother and "father" had been brought to light as well, and suddenly my credibility had been questioned. They began to question if it was all a hoax and a cry for attention.

When had victims become the accused?

Everyone in the restaurant was now standing up and looking at me. Some of them began to crowd me in. Others whipped out their cellphones, eager to record me and the circus that had become my life.

"A whore lured our honorable Coach into a sordid relationship and then cried rape," the man said between gasping breaths.

Crew's fingers tightened around the man's throat. The man tried to fight against him, but Crew, on any typical day, was formidable. In anger, he was scary as hell.

My vision was filled with blackness. The air was quickly leaving my lungs. I felt like the walls were closing in on me. Was this man serious? Did he not pay attention to the news reports? Coach Carson admitted to his transgressions. My accusations weren't unfounded or fabricated.

"You leave that girl alone," I heard an older woman's voice admonish as plump arms wrapped around me from behind. "You all need to mind your own and get back to eating or get out!"

I yelped, and the older woman immediately started to shush me.

“Hush, now, girl,” she said soothingly. “Aunt Bea got you now,” she murmured.

She ushered me out the door. “I prayed for you, you know,” she added as she led me outside. “What those men did to you was atrocious. You were a strong, brave girl. Girls that survived what you did are indestructible.”

I was unable to speak, and her words seemed far away, lost in the foggy haze surrounding my brain. I vaguely registered her words as Sal appeared, ushering me towards his car. I could see several men pulling Crew off of the man, but it all felt like I was on the outside looking in.

Sal opened the door before directing me towards it. “Sit, Peyton,” he said as he pushed me gently into a seat. “You’re okay. Breathe, you’re safe.”

An elephant was sitting on my chest. I felt like I was desperately trying to seek air through a straw as someone plugged my nose.

“This is why going out wasn’t a good idea!” Coop said as he came storming out of the diner.

Crew was a few steps behind him, clearly pissed as he stormed over to me. I knew he was blaming himself. I knew he was second-guessing this outing. Coop’s reprimand was going to haunt him for days to come.

Crew pulled me into a tight embrace and spoke gruffly in my ear, “Five things you see.”

I looked at him with panic. I grasped my chest and felt nausea threatening to heave up my delicious meal.

“Five things you see,” Crew repeated.

I looked at the storm in his gray eyes. I saw the concern in Aunt Bea’s eyes even as she grasped one of my hands. I looked up at the sky and noticed the clouds rolling across the perfect sunny sky despite the black clouds that followed me. I could see Coop pacing as he talked on the phone. Sal placed a cold bottle of water in my hands.

“Four things you can feel,” Crew said as some of the tightness began to ease.

I could feel the condensation from the bottle coat my fingers. I could feel Crew’s gentle touch as he trailed his fingers on my upper arms. Aunt Bea squeezed one of my hands. The breeze caressed my skin.

My breathing was less shallow.

“Three things you can hear,” Crew said next.

I closed my eyes, trying to do some of the meditation exercises I had YouTubed. “Leaves,” I gasped out. “A loud muffler,” I said as I heard a vehicle pass us. I heard Coop curse before I heard the sirens drawing nearer.

My eyes popped open, and I leaned my head back against the leather seats. I guess we weren’t going to be leaving in an hour.

●

“Are you sure you don’t want to press charges, Peyton?” Officer Pope gently asked as he looked over at the backwoods redneck and his buddies.

I nodded my head. “Yes,” I answered concisely.

I hated the scrutinizing looks I was getting. I knew I had lived as a hermit for almost two weeks, but I had hoped the sensationalism of my abduction and return would have died down by now.

That was one of the reasons why David and Grandpa wanted me to finish out my senior year with a tutor, but it was such a catch- 22. A tiny part of me did want to stay home and just venture out in controlled settings, like dance. However, the other massive part of me felt like I was giving Tormentor, Coach, and Principal Boyd too much power if I chose to hide for the rest of my life.

“He assaulted you the moment he touched you,” Crew growled.

I shook my head. He had grabbed me, yes. There were minor bruises on my upper forearms, but it seemed senseless to press charges for the slight slap on the wrist he would receive. Plus, all I cared about was that Crew was immediately vindicated of any wrongdoing. There were enough witnesses that stated the man attacked me with no provocation, physically and verbally.

My panic attack had ebbed away after I realized the cops had been called. My worry for Crew had pushed away all my anxiety.

“What happened?” I heard Kyler growl moments before I heard car doors slamming in the parking lot.

I winced when I realized he wasn’t alone. As if it had been choreographed, Grandpa, David, Lochlann, Paxton, Zane, and Golden pulled up beside Kyler’s truck in two other vehicles.

I sighed. “It’s taken care of.”

“What happened?” David repeated as he glared at the gathering crowd.

This newfound protectiveness he had was still foreign to me. I never expected him to take an interest in me, let alone my safety. I believed his protectiveness manifested in his belief that I “rescued” Claire. He was protective of me… but slightly overbearing with Claire.

He wasn’t giving Claire the option of returning to school. She was going to stay home for the rest of the year. A therapist and tutor came to visit her daily. He wouldn’t even allow her to leave the house to visit friends or go shopping.

We were told Leah was given a tighter rein now, too. She was getting ready to get off punishment and return to school, but David still insisted on keeping her on lockdown. Not only because he felt she hadn’t redeemed herself yet, but also because he wasn’t risking the press cornering her or them.

“Just a delusional redneck,” I huffed. “It’s fine. Crew and the *Shadows* took care of them.”

“They accused Peyton of fabricating her abduction,” Sal said with a rare frown.

“They what?” Kyler asked, his jaw clenching before he began to stalk over towards the guys in question.

They were currently in the back of a squad car talking to two other officers.

“Ky, no,” I pleaded as I grabbed one of his biceps.

It was clear he had just gotten off of work. His black t-shirt was covered in sawdust and drywall debris. I could smell his unique scent, a mixture of his sweat and cologne. It was a major turn-on for me. I thought Lochlann’s buttoned-up GQ image was sexy AF, but there was something to be said about a man that worked with his hands, too.

He had completed my house last week. I hadn't visited yet, but the guys told me it looked amazing. With the money he made on my house, he was currently flipping three other homes. He found three foreclosed homes on the outskirts of town that were reasonably close to each other, making it easy for him to work on all three projects at once.

"Mr. Fairchild," Officer Pope said in warning.

Kyler's jaw clenched. It was clear he was struggling with his logical side and his emotions. I stepped up in front of him and grasped his shoulders.

"Take me home, please. Let's get on the road and have a great weekend," I pleaded softly.

He sighed heavily before he looked down at me. He gently grasped my jaw before placing a kiss on my forehead.

"Let's go," he said reluctantly.

I smiled before leaning my head against his chest. I needed this weekend with my guys, the kids, Lucas, and Renee before school started on Monday.

●

"How bad is it?" I asked Paxton as I leaned on his shoulder.

I was thankful for the dark tinted windows as I observed a sleuth of vehicles pull into the diner's parking lot. I recognized the news vans. Some of them boasted names of out-of-state news networks.

Grandpa and David were trying their best at attempting to keep them away, but they were relentless in their pursuit of "their" story. It baffled me that they wouldn't or couldn't see the picture.

Claire was on a tight lockdown and never ventured off of my Grandpa's estate. The media were never going to "hear" their side of their stories anytime soon. Grandpa and David were determined to keep us sheltered for as long as possible.

Paxton made a noncommittal sound.

By the way, he was playing with his tongue-ring, I knew he didn't like what he was seeing. The moment my bike was loaded up onto Kyler's truck, Paxton had ushered me to the vehicle. He hadn't even bothered jumping up front with Zane. Instead, he had pulled me into the back beside him.

He cradled me for some time before he pulled out his phone. He had a slight addiction to social media, and I had a feeling he was now seeing posts with me in them. My new notoriety was so bad that I had stopped logging into any of my social media accounts. The number of messages and comments on my page had been slightly overwhelming. I chose not to look at them for my mental health after my mistake of logging in for less than a minute a few days after my return.

I had a plethora of people happy with my return, but a handful of people had called me a liar, others had called me nastier names. I never understood the power keyboard warriors thought they had. Seriously, unless it affected their health and well-being, why did they insist on pushing their negative energy and words towards others? What did they accomplish by tearing others down?

I knew the guys were also feeling the effects of my kidnapping and return, but they had been carefully hiding it away from me. Except for Paxton, I believe the others had taken a social media hiatus as well. Not that Crew had any to begin with.

“How did the bike run?” Zane attempted to sound upbeat as he turned up the music slightly.

Crew, Kyler, and I had touched my bike the most in renovating it. However, Zane had spent a lot of time out in the barn with us as we did so. It was his idea to add the heated grips and seat, after he had researched modifications out there for my bike.

“Amazing.” For a brief second, a genuine smile spread across my lips at the memory. “I forgot how freeing riding could sometimes be.”

I had been slightly pissed and disappointed my ride back to the house had been canceled.

“It wasn’t too cold?” Zane asked, peering at me through the rearview mirror.

I smiled with a shake of my head. “No. Those heated grips and seat worked wonders.”

“Good.” He flashed a satisfied smile. “I was thinking about getting Crew and Kyler Bluetooth helmets for their bikes for Christmas. Would you be interested in one?”

I laughed and shook my head once more. “Nah, you guys just got me a helmet for my birthday. I’m going to get some use out of that one first. I’ll just use earbuds for now. Thanks, though.”

He looked slightly put out for a moment, and I hoped I hadn’t ruined a Christmas surprise he’d had in store for me. It didn’t even surprise me that my planner was already purchasing Christmas gifts this early. He had a lot of OCD tendencies, and planning was one of them.

“But an extra helmet wouldn’t be a bad idea,” I quickly amended.

He looked briefly relieved, and I had to cover my smile at the fact he had such an open and honest face.

“I should probably start my Christmas list.” I twisted my ring around my finger.

In the past, Christmas was a modest affair for me. I bought a small gift for my mom, Lucas, and Madison, with the money I saved from my summer jobs. Now, money was no longer an issue, but my list had increased exponentially.

Christmas was less than three months away, and I hadn’t even thought about Christmas yet.

“The competition we’re in about a month from now isn’t too far from a town known for their Christmas Village,” Zane informed me. “Maybe one of the guys will drive my vehicle to our competition, and afterward we can head over to the village. I can book a room for us, and we can spend the night Saturday, go shopping on Sunday, and come home that night.”

My initial reaction was excitement, followed by dread. What happened if I was recognized again, so far from home? I didn’t know if I could handle another outing like today.

“If you’re not ready, I understand,” Zane said quietly, his excitement fading before my eyes.

I knew the guys wanted date days/nights with me, alone. However, recent events had put a considerable damper on much alone time. The most alone time I had with any of them was when we were sleeping.

All at once, I felt immense guilt and anger.

I felt guilty because I couldn't give them a normal relationship. At least not yet. I was angry because it was something else Tormentor, Coach, and Principal Boyd had taken away from me.

I was an eighteen-year-old woman with five and a half− Golden was just a half to me right now− virile men. Not only had those monsters stolen time away from my guys, but they still affected my relationships. It wasn't fair to them or me. My guys already got the raw end of the deal with dating a bent woman. They agreed to share me when I was slightly bent. Now I was further bent, and who knew when I'd turn back into even a shadow of my former self?

Paxton rubbed the inside of my arm, reminding me of his presence. I nearly jumped clear out of my skin, I had been so stuck in my head.

"You can disguise yourself as you did for your birthday," Paxton casually suggested.

I was surprised he was coming up with a solution to my "problem." He hadn't liked it when we decided to do individual date nights the first time around. It just showed me that he was growing. I understood his past made him afraid to lose things, and he desperately held onto some things that were important to him, people included.

I hadn't pried much into why he was placed in foster care to begin with, but I knew it wouldn't be a pretty story. There had to be a reason he had slight abandonment issues and hoarded things.

As I looked into Paxton's hazel eyes, I realized he was working on himself. I needed to as well.

"That sounds like a plan." I smiled as I leaned in closer to him, thankful he was putting his typical jealousies aside to help me find solutions for my issues.

"Really?" Zane asked, hopefully.

I chuckled. "Really. I still have my blond wig."

"I'll find you a brunette wig," Paxton teased. "I think you can pull off a darker color."

"I'm so pale," I protested.

"It may work," Zane teased as he looked back at me once more. His eyes were dancing with mischief.

“Fine.” I laughed. “Find me a wig. Maybe I can become a master of disguise until all the hype dies down. I really want to get out more,” I admitted on a quieter note.

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” Zane quoted.

A smile lurked around my lips as I recognized the quote from Lao- Tzu. It was also reminiscent of my earlier thoughts. If I continued to walk backward or stay “stagnant,” my road to recovery would be even longer.

My life had to move forward continually. I had to stop allowing my experience to cripple me physically, emotionally, and mentally.

“It’ll be an easier journey if I’m pretending to be someone else,” I joked wryly.

“Your new wig will be here on Wednesday,” Paxton crowed.

Zane and I began to laugh as Paxton shoved his phone in my face showing me his order details. It looked like Peyton Delaney would be hiding in a brown wig as she found herself once more.

3

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Weekend Getaway

“Is this the bag you’re taking?” Zane asked as he strolled into the room.

I nodded. It didn’t take me long to pack for our two-night, two-day trip. Lochlann had come up with the idea to go to his father’s shop so he could check in on it and get my bike painted. Paxton had jumped in on the planning and insisted that we all go. It had been some time since he had seen his father’s employees, and he thought I would like to see it firsthand.

It was a two-hour drive, but they decided to make a weekend of it. Zane and Crew had a rare Friday night off from football, and Kyler was in a good place with his projects. He chose to give his guys the weekend off so they could enjoy a full weekend with their families as well.

“I just have to grab my jacket,” I told him. “And I want to pack my shoes in a different bag. I can take them.” I protested when he scooped down and grabbed my bag.

Zane shook his head and smiled. “I know you can, but I want to help.”

He must have seen the rebellious look in my expression because he smiled at me gently. “You can carry your other bag up.”

I knew it was useless to argue with him. “Fine,” I muttered.

Zane grinned and turned to leave. He suddenly stopped in my doorway before turning around and coming back to me.

He placed his lips over mine and kissed me sensuously. I moaned and leaned into him, weaving my fingers through his thick, dark hair. I loved the feel of his tongue entangling with mine, and I braced one of my hands against his chest, admiring the firmness of his pecs. I moved closer to him, so now our hips were flush, and I could feel his arousal.

He pulled away when I rubbed against him. “I’m going to load your bag,” he said huskily before kissing my nose and leaving.

I barely refrained from growling. “Thanks,” I muttered in displeasure.

These men were driving me crazy! Before I was taken, I was just getting to know some of them on an intimate level. After a week of my return, I realized my libido had returned, and I was eager to continue our explorations and lose myself in them once more. Unfortunately, they must have had some family meeting− one I hadn’t been invited to− and had decided not to have sex with me. There was a lot of heavy petting and making out, but they all stopped it before it got too far, and it was driving me crazy.

Well, with most of them. Like I said. I was still iffy with Golden. I allowed him to keep me company in bed at night, and I would cuddle with him, but there was still a part of me that was leery of his devotion and affection. I found myself wondering if he was still talking to Madison or if it was her that texted him frequently.

When she tried to talk to me before she left the Isaacs’ household, I firmly told her I wasn’t ready to talk to her yet. I let her know I knew she had kissed Golden, and I was hurt and upset that she would do that to me. When she tried to explain herself, I had shut her down and reminded her that I was going through enough and wasn’t ready or willing to listen to any of her excuses.

She had cried, leaving the house, but had explained to me that she was going to remain in town. She liked our school, she said, that it offered a lot more opportunities for her in cheerleading now that Ms. Houser was the full-time coach, since Selena was still out on administrative leave.

But I still wasn’t ready to talk to her yet. I understood she and Golden had taken comfort in each other in my absence. I could even comprehend the fact she had been drawn to Golden. All my guys had a magnetic quality about them, but she shouldn’t have ever acted on them.

“Pey, Pey, Pey,” I could hear Clay screaming my name as his voice drew closer. Paxton was carrying him as they came into the room.

I had only been separated from Clay for a short period of time, and in my absence, the little stinker had decided to learn how to walk, and his speech had improved immensely. It made me so happy, yet sad that I had missed it.

The moment his light hazel eyes locked in on me, he was squirming out of Paxton's grasp. Paxton laughed before setting him down. Clay wasted no time toddling over to me at a fast clip. He wasn't running yet, but I had a feeling it was only a matter of time before he was. He launched himself into my legs, and I laughed before scooping him up.

Paxton had just picked him up from daycare. As for Maisie, Lochlann had picked her up from Mr. Jenkins' house. Luckily, the older man was willing to watch her for a little while during the diner altercation.

"Clay," I crooned lovingly before nuzzling his little neck.

In the short time I had been with the guys, the kids had come to mean so much to me. I loved spending time with them, and I knew they cared for me as well. Several days after my return, I would not only wake up with one or two of the guys in my bed but Maisie as well.

My absence had greatly affected her. She had just lost her adopted mother, father, and siblings a few short months ago, so when I had disappeared, she had been nearly inconsolable. She thought I was never going to return. She had to start seeing her therapist once more because she was unwilling to communicate with the guys.

She found ways to cope with my absence, but when I had returned and the guys picked up the kids, Maisie spent the first week or so following my every move. There had been several times I found her quietly playing on my bedroom floor as I napped. She had behaved as if I would disappear at any given moment, so she wanted to prevent it from happening again.

It wasn't until the beginning of this week that she seemed to let up slightly. As endearing as it was, I had started to feel even more claustrophobic for a while there. Between the guys, the Shadows, and the children, I felt like I couldn't even use the bathroom without someone wanting to follow me.

I think they were all starting to understand that I loved their company, and I appreciated their desire to help me in any way, but there was a fine line between smothering me and supporting me. It was definitely something we had to navigate through together. I was just pleased that they all seemed receptive to listening to me when I finally voiced my struggles.

Clay braced my face with his chubby hands before placing a wet sloppy kiss on my cheeks. “Kiss. Kiss,” he said, rocking excitedly.

I giggled at his excitement. I couldn’t deny that his presence was healing me. His innocence, joy, natural sunny disposition, and the way he embraced the simple things in life put many things in perspective for me. We had nearly lost him that one time, but thankfully, we came to his aid in time. There were no lasting damages to his brain, and I was so thankful he was still with us today.

“Stop trying to steal my girl, man,” Paxton protested with a grin before he placed his arms around both of us.

“Mine!” Clay crowed before wrapping his plump arms around my neck and squeezing.

“No, mine!” Paxton argued teasingly back.

“Mine!” Clay tucked his head under my neck before sticking his thumb into his mouth.

“Yes, yours,” I crooned with a mischievous smile in Paxton’s direction.

I gently patted Clay’s back before picking up my backpack that held a few pairs of shoes, tablets, and chargers. As expected, Paxton took the bag from me and slung it over his shoulders.

“I’ll let you believe that Peyton’s yours for now, you little punk,” Paxton said, playfully tugging on one of Clay’s curls.

“Punk!” Clay mutinously repeated.

“Pax!” I mockingly growled at Paxton as he riotously started laughing. “He’s going to go back to daycare and teach all his friends that not-nice word!”

“Not nice,” Clay mimicked.

Paxton laughed once more, and I ruefully smiled as we headed towards the stairs. “Little parrot.” I kissed the top of Clay’s head.

He pulled back and grinned at me. My heart melted at his precious beauty.

As we made our way outside, I noticed that Crew and Kyler had my bike loaded up on a trailer behind one of the large SUVs. Zane was packing up the back end of another SUV with our stuff, and Sal was loading his bags in their black Audi.

“Ready?” Lochlann asked as he came up behind me.

“Ready, Freddy!” Maisie cried out excitedly as she came barreling out of the door behind us.

Her little feet didn’t even touch the stairs as she took a running leap and jumped down. Her long pigtails and backpack bounced with each step she took.

She suddenly whirled around. “Are we stopping to get snacks?”

“That’s the plan, Moo, now get in your car seat,” Kyler commanded her with a smile.

“Where’s Renee?” I asked, finally noticing her absence.

Renee was the only one who didn’t look at me with pity or treat me like broken glass. I appreciated her ability to realize that was the last thing I wanted or needed from her or anyone else. Even though she was two years younger than me, she had a maturity level that rivaled many of my peers.

“We’re going to pick her up from the dance studio,” Zane explained. “I hope you’re ready for classes on Monday. It’s competition season, and Mom won’t let up now that she knows we’re performing together.”

I paused before putting Clay into his car seat. I had completely forgotten that the Elite Vibe competition was next weekend. That flare of excitement I got riding this morning rekindled itself as I thought about our dance. We already had it down before I was abducted, so it wouldn’t take me long to reacquaint myself with the song, the choreography, and Zane.

“Mom’s not rushing you,” Zane added hesitantly.

“No!” I instantly protested. “I just forgot it was this weekend. I’m looking forward to dancing with you.”

“Did Bryce clear you?” Paxton inquired with a frown.

I barely refrained from sighing as I clicked Clay into his car seat. I smoothed his hair back and wondered if we should get it cut

soon since it was nearly down to his shoulders and always fell into his eyes. My only concern was I didn't want him to lose his curls. I had a friend that was born with a head full of curls, but once they cut them, they never returned. I couldn't imagine my Clay without them!

"Yes," Kyler answered for me.

I smiled up at him, thankful for answering for me while I got easily distracted. It happened a lot nowadays.

Kyler had gone to my last appointment with me, and he wouldn't have allowed me to return to dancing unless I had gotten a clean bill of health.

"I already caught her dancing the other day," Golden teased as he threw his bags into the truck.

Me and Golden: I couldn't explain the state of our relationship, even if I tried. There was clearly dissension between us that wasn't there before. I knew he still blamed himself for my abduction. However, there wasn't even a tiny part of me that found him culpable. Even if he had been in the best shape of his life, there was no guarantee that Coach wouldn't have been able to carry me away.

In my new… vulnerable state, I was still plagued with doubts. Part of me even wondered if his and Madison's relationship would have grown had I never returned. Was there a proper time of "mourning" that should have occurred? I knew he said he hadn't reciprocated the kiss or her feelings, but there was no denying their easy friendship. Hell, he had holed himself away with her for several days after my return. I wondered if they would have continued that behavior had I not confronted them.

Honestly, they were similar in many ways. If I hadn't met Golden first and grown feelings for him, I could easily see them together. Looks-wise, they even complimented each other. They were the perfect Ken and Barbie. Both of them were blond, golden, and charming. Sometimes it was a bitter pill to swallow, mostly because I felt all the guys deserved to be in a relationship with a woman that focused all her attention on them and didn't have to divide it.

"You just got cleared yesterday." Kyler gave me a reproaching look.

I smiled and shrugged, back to the subject of dancing again. “I know my limitations.”

Golden’s phone began to ring, and he pulled it out of his pocket. The smile on his lips died, and he looked at me with a look akin to guilt before he swiped his finger over his screen. It rang again seconds later.

I immediately knew it was Madison. She was persistent when she set her mind to something. She also seized any opportunity given to her to seek her desires. It was clear she wasn’t over Golden yet.

I was also informed that they were paired up together for a project on Wednesday. I didn’t know if my irritation stemmed from the many classes they shared or from the project they were expected to spend additional time together with.

“Just answer it,” I said tersely before going on the opposite side to get in the vehicle. “I already heard how you guys have a Spanish project together.”

It still exasperated me that Paxton had informed me about their project and not Golden.

“My Spanish teacher wouldn’t let me switch partners.” Golden frowned as he followed me.

“Okay.” I tried to give him a nonchalant shrug.

Inside, I was seething. I knew Golden and Madison had just been assigned the project, but he should have told me. I shouldn’t have found out from Paxton. His unwillingness to let me know made me believe he behaved as if he had something to hide.

Madison shared quite a few classes with Golden, so I knew it was inevitable that they saw each other and still talked. I didn’t expect him to behave cruelly towards her or shun her entirely, but I didn’t want him hanging out with her either.

It wasn’t necessarily a jealousy issue; it didn’t bother me or make me worried when they hung out with Renee or gave her rides. Maybe it was because I trusted Renee more, which was sad. Madison and I had been best friends for fifteen years. I should have never had to worry about her with one of my guys.

His phone began ringing once more, and I rolled my eyes as I slid into the seat beside Clay. I buckled in as Zane took the place on

my opposite side.

“He’s trying,” Zane said softly.

I nodded, unwilling to talk about it right now.

“Because this weekend doesn’t work,” Golden was saying as he paced by the door. “Maddie, please,” he continued.

I scoffed silently at the nickname as I crossed my arms over my chest. Madison absolutely despised it. Yet Golden called her by it all the time and I never heard her correct him.

“I can’t do this right now,” Golden’s voice drifted inside the vehicle. “I’m busy. We have over a week before the assignment is due. I’ll do my half. You can do your half. Then we’ll talk to each other in Spanish class.” He paused for a moment. “I can’t come by your apartment, and you can’t come over here. I’m sorry, but that’s how it’s going to have to be. Look, I got to go. I’ll see you at school on Monday.”

He hung up and looked at me. “I’m sorry.” He gave me an apologetic look.

I could see his struggle. I knew he had formed a friendship with Madison, and they had found comfort in each other in my absence. I also could see that they could have been perfect for each other in different circumstances. I think that’s what I struggled with the most.

“Madison doesn’t seem to understand that I can’t be her friend and be with you at the same time,” Golden continued.

“But you want to be,” I stated as I slipped off Clay’s shoes. He had an aversion to his footwear, and we were in for a lengthy road trip. If he ripped them off, they were guaranteed to end up beneath the seat or on the side of the door, or worse, lost to the void.

“I never said that!” Golden gave me a combination look of exasperation and silent pleading, then cast a furtive glance over at Zane. “Can we talk about this later? It’s bad enough that everything I say or do is on blast. I wasn’t even given a chance to tell you about my project before somebody opened their big mouth.” He glared towards Paxton, who slid into the passenger seat.

Paxton gave a careless shrug. “You got the assignment yesterday. I would have assumed you would have told her. It slipped

out on the way home today. I didn't think I was spilling any secrets. This is on you, bro."

"I was on concessions last night after school for the track meet. By the time I got home, she was asleep. When did I have time to tell her?" Golden sneered as he braced himself on my open door.

"This," Paxton held up his phone. "It's called a phone, and we have an amazing service. You could have texted Peyton."

I really appreciated Paxton's candor.

"I saw you over breakfast," I reminded Golden.

"Are we ready?" Lochlann asked as he pulled up beside us, windows down. "Everything okay?"

"I think we'll ride with you or Kyler," Zane informed him.

I began to protest, but Zane firmly shook his head. "You guys need to talk," he insisted, motioning to Golden. "You're driving with Peyton and Clay."

I was just as reluctant to have this discussion as Golden was. If he wanted to continue kicking the can down the road, maybe his actions were speaking louder than his words.

"Come on, Pax," Zane insisted before he climbed out from behind the driver's seat.

Pax rolled his eyes but reluctantly climbed out, too. "Don't be a dumbass," he muttered in Golden's direction.

Golden flipped him the bird without even bothering to look at him.

I sighed but climbed out of the back seat to slide into the front seat. It looked like we were having this conversation, ready or not.

"I don't want to be with Madison," Golden insisted after he slid into the driver's seat. He put the SUV in drive and followed Lochlann down the driveway.

"It's hard to believe that at times. I mean, technically, you were able to forge a tighter bond with her in the eighteen days of my absence than the time we had before I was taken," I argued. "Are you sure you still want to be with me? If you remain with me, you'll always be fighting for my attention with five other guys, and let's not forget school and dance. If there's any doubt about us, I rather you make that decision now. I won't even hold a grudge or condemn your decision."

The words tasted bitter in my mouth, but I felt compelled to tell him how I felt. I didn't want him to be with me out of some sense of obligation. I didn't want him to attempt to make our relationship work if he wanted to be with Madison. It was going to hurt letting him go, but sometimes letting go of the proverbial rope instead of clutching it tight caused less damage.

Golden sighed deeply. The knuckles of one hand beat against the steering wheel in agitation, while the other hand ran through his golden locks. It had gotten longer in my absence, and he hadn't cut it since my return. Now it had a heavy wave to it.

"I want to be with you," Golden insisted before he glanced in my direction. "I just have this constant feeling that we take two steps forward, then three steps back. I've tried to atone for my mistakes, and I feel like you'll never forgive me for Madison kissing me. *She* kissed me! You can ask the guys. After she kissed me, I put distance between us. She's a cool girl, but I want a relationship with you. However, I can't work on this and us if you pull me in close one minute and push me away the next.

"I want to know if you even want me anymore," he continued. "Are you insisting I try to build a relationship with Madison because you know you'll never wholly forgive me? I know I made a mistake. I knew I shouldn't have been so reliant on her companionship. I honestly don't believe I ever led her on or even encouraged her feelings. If you can't find it in your heart to truly forgive me, I feel like I'm just spinning my wheels. I'm trying. I can't help it that we go to the same school and have most of the same classes. I haven't encouraged Madison to call and text me continually. Short of blocking her, I'm not sure what you want me to do."

He paused for a minute, then nodded thoughtfully. "I know what I want and *who* I want, and that's you, Peyton. Are you certain you still want me? Because if you do, I can't continue feeling like no matter what I say or do, you'll never trust me again."

I heard the vulnerability in his voice, and once again, I felt torn between my feelings. I wanted to forgive him, but the thought of Madison kissing him still plagued me.

But I had to admit that he was right. I *had* allowed my bitterness and insecurities to affect our relationship time and time

again since my return. I needed to either let those go or let him go. I just didn't know what would be best for my mental health in the long run.

"I want to be with you," I admitted quietly. "I just don't know where to go from here. I want to forgive you. However, I'm a realist. If I so much as see Madison around you in school on Monday, I know I'm gonna have ugly emotions." My voice cracked unexpectedly, and I felt the warmth of tears burn my eyes. I didn't want to let Golden go. I desired the relationship we had− before I was taken− back.

"I've never been a jealous person, Golden," I said, my voice trembling with feeling. "I think it's such a soul-sucking emotion. I don't want to be that person, and I'm not sure I know how to stop those feelings. What if we're too toxic for each other?"

Golden grasped my hand and squeezed it. "Don't give up on me." His voice cracked with his own emotion. "Don't give up on us. Let me prove to you that we are meant to be together."

I wiped my eyes with the back of my sleeve. I hated crying. I hated the tightness in my chest, the puffiness it made to my eyes, the runny nose, and the wholly drained feeling I felt afterward. I pulled my knees up to my chest and leaned my head against my knees, trying to avert my eyes from him so he didn't see my tears. I was overwhelmed with many emotions, but I didn't know how to articulate them all.

"Don't cry, darlin'." He reached into the glove box and handed me a pack of travel-sized tissues. "Please."

I looked over at him and tried to give him a watery smile. I wanted to tell him I wouldn't be crying if it weren't for his actions, but I knew further recriminations would get us nowhere. I wanted an *us*. I just hoped I wouldn't regret my decision in the future. I had begun to fall for him, but it was early yet. Maybe I could salvage my heart by walking away now. However, I didn't want to live with the regret that I hadn't tried hard enough on our relationship.

I pulled out a tissue with shaky hands and wiped my nose, then drew a deep, shaky breath in. "We have a lot of work to do," I whispered.

"And I'll bust my ass showing you," Golden said fervently, looking very relieved. "We need to communicate more. Please just

tell me how to fix this."

"I don't know where to begin," I admitted quietly. "So many thoughts and feelings are crammed in my head. I don't want to give you a list when I know I need to work on myself, too. How about we talk about it as we go? No more tip-toeing around our issues?"

"Deal," Golden's deep southern voice drawled. He grabbed my hand, smiled at me, and kissed the back of it. "I don't think communication, real communication, was anything we have ever been good with."

I nodded in agreement. Golden was right. We were both great at putting up a façade to fool others. I still had no clue why he was put in the system, but I knew it wasn't a pretty story, just like Paxton's. I never even broached the subject with him. Golden hid a dark side behind his charismatic smiles.

And me? I had been so busy hiding my homelife from everyone that I was still learning how to open up. I always found myself believing that if I ignored a situation or didn't divulge too much to anyone, everything would work itself out.

Maybe it did work, but in theory, not in real life. Not if I ever wanted to live a meaningful, fulfilling one.

Clay decided to remind us of his presence. "Joo," he demanded moments before his cup hit his window.

I jumped and tried to laugh at my skittishness.

Joo was Clay's way of asking for juice. It still baffled me the amount his vocabulary had grown in my absence.

"How do you ask?" Golden gently admonished him.

"Peas," he crowed.

I laughed once more before unbuckling my seatbelt to provide the little dictator with his beverage of choice.

After I gave him his water/juice mixture, I slid back into my seat, feeling emotionally drained from the day's events. I found my eyes growing heavy as I mulled over my next actions.

"Get some rest." Golden carefully reached in the back and handed me a throw blanket and pillow. "We can talk more later."

I hadn't even realized one of the guys had stashed them back there. I sighed deeply at their thoughtfulness, then smiled sleepily over at Golden as I resituated myself so I could use the center

console and pillow to rest my head. As I drifted off, I felt his fingers gently begin to stroke my head.

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"You guys own this house?" I inquired in disbelief as I stepped out onto the porch.

When the guys told me we were going to one of their rentals, I assumed it would be like the other one they owned in town. The house in town was a townhouse of sorts, with roughly four nine-hundred square-foot homes. They were modest and nowhere near as extravagant as this house.

The house sat on a secluded drive that sat on top of a mountain overlooking the town below. It was a beautiful, updated log cabin that was at least three-thousand square feet, with eight bedrooms and five bathrooms. It also boasted an indoor pool, theater room, recreation room, and two wrap-around porches on the main and top floors. The upper floor porch had a hot tub, which looked highly inviting, promising a stunning view of the beautiful valley beyond.

"It was one of Mam and Da's investments," Paxton confirmed with a nod. "You should have seen it before they renovated it." He mock-shuddered. "Once they fixed it up, they decided to rent it out. The people that were supposed to rent it out this week chose to cancel their reservations. It doesn't happen often. So… want to get changed in your swimsuit and meet me back at the hot tub?"

My initial instinct was to nod enthusiastically. However, it was quickly followed by the knowledge that it was still the broad light of day, and my scars would be out there for all to see.

"I should probably help with dinner," I demurred.

"Lochlann and Golden have it covered," Kyler said. "Lochlann's putting on some steaks, and Golden just put in the baked potatoes and is whipping up a salad as we speak. You can wear a t-shirt if you want." Kyler murmured the last part as he stepped up behind me, embracing me.

I visibly relaxed. Slightly. "Okay. Which room's mine?" I inquired.

Logically I knew they had all seen my scars, and none of them treated me differently, but I had caught them looking at them. Not in disgust, more like anger and remorse. Like they could have controlled what I went through.

I was still highly conscious of them. So aware of them, I couldn't even look in the mirror anymore. I knew I had to get over this and quickly. It was easy to hide with no make-up and loose clothing in the comfort of our home. However, dance and school resumed soon.

"I'll show you," Kyler volunteered. "We decided to give the Shadows their own rooms, so one or some of us will be sharing one of the masters with you."

I vaguely remembered the masters on the main floor and the second story.

As soon as we had arrived, Paxton had taken my hand and immediately dragged me around the house once. Lochlann had gone to the kitchen to check the pantry and fridge. Apparently, they had a property manager that generally ensured the house cleaners kept it clean, maintained and oversaw the property, and stocked up on the basics. The married couple had gone above and beyond, stocking the pantry and fridge, knowing we were utilizing the cabin this weekend.

Golden and Zane had taken a sleeping Clay to the room he was sharing with Maisie. It had three sets of triple bunks currently, so a crib had to be set up. It was too early to put him down, so he would probably wake up later, but we knew better than to wake him up if he was in a deep sleep like he had been.

Crew had taken Maisie to the theater room and was setting it up for her. It was clear that they had all vacationed here at one point or another. Kyler admitted to getting the construction bug from Da. He informed me that Da had taken a teenaged Kyler and Lochlann up here on weekends to help with the cabin. The money they had been paid had been the initial motivation, but eventually, Kyler realized he enjoyed working with his hands and transforming things.

Da had volunteered to send him to a trade school, but his pride made him determined to make it on his own, so he had joined the military.

"It's my turn," Paxton nearly sulked at this new development in sleeping arrangements as he trailed behind us.

"We already drew straws," Kyler said with a straight face, although I saw the mirth and mischief in his eyes.

“Drawing straws?” Paxton protested. “Our rotation shouldn’t change because we decided to go away for the weekend.”

The guys had come up with a sleeping schedule amongst themselves, unbeknownst to me. I didn’t question it, and it seemed to work for them. It worked for me, too, because when the darkness sought me in my dreams, their presence seemed to soothe me.

“It shouldn’t, but new place, new rotation,” Kyler says a bit smugly.

I knew Kyler was only riling up my “needy” boyfriend, Paxton, but I was somewhat powerless to stop him. The others often teased poor Paxton, and in the time that I had gotten to know them, I realized it was precisely what Paxton needed. I still didn’t know why—or who—gave my sensitive guy abandonment issues, but I realized if the guys always gave into Paxton’s insecurities, they’d only intensify.

Kyler looked over at me and winked, and I couldn’t stifle the laughter that bubbled up. Paxton’s crestfallen look dropped away as he realized Kyler had been teasing him.

“Douche,” Paxton muttered in an attempt to sound disgruntled, but he was unable to mask his delight that he wasn’t losing his turn to sleep with me.

We reached the room as Kyler busted out laughing. “Come on, Pax, you really need to stop trying to monopolize our girl to yourself all the time.”

It was somewhat true. The guys had to force Paxton to return to school, otherwise he would have stayed with me my entire convalescing time. I was excused, of course, but as understanding as Principal Fanning was with my situation, he hadn’t extended it to the guys. The teachers were a little more understanding and seemed to be giving them some allowances, and it helped that they never missed testing days.

“I don’t do that,” Paxton spluttered his disagreement.

“You really do,” Zane said with an easy grin as he came out of one of the rooms in just his swim trunks and a towel wrapped around his neck. “Now, let's get in the hot tub while Lochlann and Golden whip us up some dinner.”

I stopped dead in my tracks as I greedily soaked in his beautifully sculpted body. His dedication to football and teaching

dance classes was in every hard-line, bulge, and dip of his physique. Suddenly I couldn't wait to be on the dance floor with him once more.

I felt a thumb grace my lower lip, and I both yelped and flinched at the same time.

"Sorry," Paxton looked sheepish as he dipped his head. "I was just wiping the drool from your mouth and I forgot."

I sighed and leaned against him. "There's nothing to be apologetic about," I muttered as I leaned my forehead against his chest.

I took a deep fortifying breath and blew it back out. I needed to stop being such a basket case. Paxton was just trying to tease me, and I had flinched as if he would hit me. Years of abuse from Sean and my captivity was spilling over into the most unexpected places at the most random times.

"Have you called…" Zane began.

"No," I cut in quickly.

Lochlann and Zane were especially concerned about my mental health. A day hadn't gone by without one of them asking me if I had called the therapist Bryce had recommended. I knew they meant well, but the thought of re-opening up the wounds that still festered right below the surface terrified me. The idea of talking to a stranger about my experiences made me as excited as taking sandpaper to a cut.

I heard my name being yelled from the main floor.

"Peyton!"

I instantly recognized Lucas's voice and silently thanked him for his timely interruption. He bounded up the stairs, and Kyler and Zane immediately seemed to take a protective stance in front of me.

I tapped their arms and sidled my way between them so I could hug my best friend. He may have betrayed me with Clementine at one point, but at least I never had to worry about him trying to steal one of my boyfriends.

He held me tight. I eventually had to squirm against him and forced out a light laugh. "Simmer down. You're going to crush me to death."

He chuckled before he pulled back. "I'm sorry, but it's your fault. You wouldn't let me visit you, and I still worry about you."

I felt bad for shutting him out, but we went through a brief awkward stage when I found out he'd had a crush on me. Mind you, it hadn't seemed to surface until after I moved and he saw me with a real boyfriend, or, should I say, *boyfriends*. I casually dated in the past, but I never got serious with any of them. Lucas had been my number one guy since kindergarten, so it had been hard for him at first.

Since then, he became close to Renee, and I wouldn't be surprised if they started dating eventually. I knew they texted each other frequently despite the distance between them. For now, I was certain they were flirting but leaving it at that.

"She's been well cared for," Paxton scoffed slightly. "Now, go get dressed so we can continue this reunion in the hot tub."

It had taken a while for Paxton to warm up to Lucas. Now I think they both understood their places in my life. I just appreciated that they were making an effort.

"Sweet!" Lucas crowed.

"I'll show you your room, Lucas," Zane suggested, then looked at us. "You guys get dressed."

I reluctantly turned towards my room. Might as well get this over with.

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Tough discussions

“Madison keeps calling.” Lucas sighed as he put his phone back on the ledge.

The moment we’d gotten done with dinner, we had put Maisie and Clay down for the night. Then most of us got dressed to get into the hot tub again. Lochlann and Crew opted for a game of spades with the Shadows, playing on the porch beside the hot tub.

Lochlann seemed to be in a constant state of alertness. He might’ve been affectionate with me in front of the Shadows, but he was still aware of how he treated me and what he did in front of people like Renee and Lucas.

“Welcome to the club,” I heard Golden mutter before leaning his head back onto the hot tub.

“I wish you would have told me that you weren’t talking to her.” Lucas sighed.

“I’m surprised she didn’t tell you.” I shrugged.

“She told me about getting on the team, and she had griped when her dad set a limit on her spending, but other than that…” He shrugged as well. “Now that she knows I’m with you, she’s upset I didn’t invite her along.”

“It wasn’t your place to invite anyone,” I scoffed, irritated by Madison’s audacity to assume she could invite herself anywhere, just as she had done by moving into my new hometown. “She knew how much the guys meant to me. I was taken. *Abducted!* I wasn’t even gone a month and she kissed Golden? In the past, I *always* looked the other way when she moved in on the guys I was interested in, but this was different, and she knew it.”

I was shaking, so upset with this conversation. I knew Lucas meant well, and, in this case, he was on my side. However, knowing him, he was going to try and “fix” us. And for once, I didn’t know if there was any way *to* fix us.

I felt Paxton and Zane move in close to me, and I appreciated their presence. Golden and I'd had a much-needed discussion, but I knew we were a work in progress. Honestly, I was hoping to relax this weekend and not think about Madison.

I had missed Lucas, though, and I was glad he'd respected my wishes when I requested him to let me… decompress and get my bearings. I knew it took a lot of willpower for him to have stayed away for as long as he had. He wasn't known for his patience.

"I'm not giving her any excuses, and I don't condone her behavior, but I think something happened to her." Lucas frowned. "She was different after she came back from cheer camp last summer. I thought it was because you had left us, but then…" He blew a raspberry out of his pursed lips. "I don't know. She began drinking a lot, started hooking up with a lot of guys—"

I scoffed. She always "lived in the moment."

"A lot more than usual," Lucas hurriedly clarified. "And it wasn't just popular hot jocks. It was scum like Bud Riley and Swaggy."

I grimaced. Both guys were reprehensible and low-lives. Bud Riley might have been a jock, sure, but he was a bully. The only way he made it to his senior year was because of his stepmom, who was an administrator for the school district, and by paying people to do his work/copying off of them.

Once, I'd had to do a project with him our sophomore year, and to this day I believed he couldn't read. I didn't know if it was out of pure laziness or cerebral insufficiency. He behaved as if he were owed everything, above putting any work into anything he did.

Glenn Sutherland, A.K.A Swaggy G, renamed himself our freshman year of high school after he fell in with a local gang. He thought he was hot shit, but in truth, he was nothing better than a lackey and drug pusher for a gang that wasn't too bright. They used more of their merchandise than distributing it.

Madison would have never given them the time of day in the past. What made her lower her standards so much that she had been willing to talk to them, let alone *sleep* with them? I recalled Lucas informing me of their threesome, but I had thought it was a joke. Kind of. Sort of.

“We’ve been giving her excuses her whole life,” I stated a tad bitterly. “She’s thoughtful and generous when it comes to material things, but she’s always been selfish in other areas. She knew that Golden was one of my guys. She had a whole school of fresh meat, and she had to go after him?”

“Did you mislead her in any way?” Lucas turned to Golden with a suspicious glare. “There had to be a reason she thought you were receptive to the idea. Did you flirt with her?”

I could see Golden’s eyebrow twitch. He would have thrown out a sarcastic response in the past, but I knew he was much more careful with his words when I was around, nowadays.

“Paxton and Golden are natural flirts,” Renee said in an exasperated tone, joining the conversation. “They’re playful flirts, just like you.” She shot Lucas a look. “It’s not sexual or misleading. Well, maybe *flirting* is the wrong word. Maybe ‘over-the-top friendly.’”

That was very true of Golden and Paxton in the past. I had seen how “friendly” they were with females. They were attentive and great listeners, but they weren’t suggestive in their actions, like overly complimenting a female. They seemed to be able to balance the fine line of suggestive flirting and playful flirting.

Of course, my mind wanted to overanalyze this. I was so confident in who I was and my self-worth before I was taken. Now I wondered if Paxton and Golden’s playful, flirty, friendly behavior was something I should have condoned or had been okay with. If it hadn’t bothered me before, why was I allowing it to bother me now?

“Meredith left us some apple crumble and ice cream,” Kyler stood up. “Peyton, wanna help dish them out?”

Meredith was the property manager and family friend. Apparently, Da, Paxton, Kyler, and Lochlann had a weakness for her apple crumble. She had given us reheating instructions and had left the dessert in the refrigerator. Lochlann must have given her a heads up, because the pans she’d left behind were more than enough for all of us, including the Shadows.

I was thankful that Kyler realized this conversation was one I needed to walk away from. Lucas would try to fix Madison and me, and I had just decided to repair *Golden* and me. I wasn’t ready to even contemplate forgiving Madison at this point.

Lucas was relentless, and it was apparent he didn't realize I wasn't willing to participate in this discussion at the moment. I stood up, thankful for the interruption. I really didn't need to find any more rabbit holes to tumble down.

"I'll help," Zane volunteered as he stood up as well.

I feigned a smile as I gingerly stepped onto the ledge of the hot tub. The water streaming down my legs was slightly annoying, but that was the price I paid for wearing a long sleeve t-shirt in the tub. I had vacillated with my decision for several moments but finally decided that I didn't want my scars on display. Lucas had yet to see them, and he would have been slightly dramatic if faced with them.

Kyler grabbed a towel and held it out in front of me. He wrapped it around my shoulders, and I leaned into him gratefully.

"Thanks," I murmured.

Together, the three of us went back into the house and down the staircase into the large kitchen/dining/great room.

"Do you want me to grab a hoodie for you, maybe some sweats?" Zane inquired as he rubbed a towel through his hair.

I didn't know why some actions were more fascinating to me than others, but watching him do the simple act of drying off was hot. My earlier dark thoughts were pushed aside as I realized how very distracting he was. I needed to get laid this weekend. I knew I was still fragile, but I wasn't going to break.

I had no doubt I was ready for my physical relationships to resume in a life full of uncertainty.

"Pey?" Zane gently prodded.

"Mmm, yes, please." I hid my warming face in the fridge as I retrieved the apple crumble.

"I'm setting the oven to three-fifty," Kyler informed me.

He lightly touched my waist before sliding behind me and nuzzling his face in the crook of my neck. I think he was the most understanding with the PTSD I was struggling with. There were things both of us had trouble with; it was never good to sneak up behind us. The guys also realized that if I was "in my own world," they should announce their presence before approaching me.

Sometimes they forgot, but I think being around Kyler helped them pick up some nonverbal clues. It also helped that Kyler wasn't

shy, telling our family how to approach us and handle us in certain situations.

I sighed before I leaned back into him. He was still slightly wet, but I didn't mind. The security I felt in his arms gave me a feeling of bliss. I closed my eyes and just breathed in his scent. He had taken a shower before dinner, so his smell of manliness had been washed away, leaving behind the scent of just his body wash and cologne.

"What's the likelihood of Paxton switching nights with me tonight?" Kyler murmured into my ear.

I laughed quietly. "Slim to none."

"He never was very good at sharing," Kyler grumbled playfully.

"He's gotten better," I defended Paxton half-heartedly.

He really had. When we had first met, I hadn't noticed Paxton's "hoarding" tendencies. It was clear when I finally saw his room that he had trouble letting things go or donating stuff. It was amazing he could find anything in his room, considering the sheer amount of things he had crammed in there.

"Who's gotten better?" Zane inquired as he came back in carrying clothing and dressed in just pajama bottoms.

"Paxton and his… coveting." I smirked.

"Umm…" Zane coughs out a laugh. "Sure. Sure he has."

It shouldn't have surprised me that he knew exactly what we were talking about. Zane could be rather astute, and he observed quite a bit. I didn't know if it was because he was an only child or something that was an inherent trait.

Kyler began chuckling too.

"Stop!" I laugh. "I said he was getting better. He just isn't all the way there yet."

I didn't think he ever would be, but I also didn't think I'd ever want him to change completely. It slightly stroked my wounded ego to know no other girl had affected him the way I did. From what the guys had told me, I was the only female he had even dated.

I heard Golden clear his throat. "Peyton, can we talk again?"

I stiffened slightly. I knew we had agreed to talk more and communicate with each other, but this was a little overwhelming.

With Lucas bringing up Madison again, it made me realize she wouldn't ever stop pursuing Golden. It was clear she had her sights

set on him. No matter how much Golden wanted our relationship, her presence wouldn't help in any way.

Yes, I was giving myself whiplash with my wishy-washy emotions.

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I closed the bathroom door behind me and padded over to the bed. Golden had changed and was sitting with his back braced against the massive four-poster headboard. He was fiddling on his phone, and his preoccupation struck me again.

I thought we were headed in the right direction. Then it almost felt like he was pulling away once more.

He hadn't been so sucked into his phone before my abduction. Now it felt like he was constantly on it or playing with it. Even if he wasn't texting Madison or one of his other many friends I'd never met, I didn't like it. Call me crazy or insecure, but I felt as if shallow, surface communications had replaced authentic human connection. The ability to text or get sucked into social media platforms had replaced our ability to enjoy the people or things around us in the moment.

Don't get me wrong. I didn't mind social media, and texting was so much easier at times than actually picking up the phone, but it should never replace our… *now* moments. Unfortunately, with Golden, that seemed like his habit of late. He was barely with us. Not mentally, anyway.

"Ready?" Golden asked.

His eyes held such remorse and fear. It was a rare glimpse of the emotions he kept carefully hidden of late.

"Are you?" I inquired a tad sarcastically.

I pulled up my sweats so I could comfortably climb onto the bed. Zane must not have bothered looking into my bags when he grabbed them, because the sweats and hoodie were his. His laundry detergent and unique scent clung to the fibers of his clothing. I didn't care if it was slightly too big on me. That also brought me comfort.

In fact, before this afternoon, I had grown accustomed to not caring what I wore. My daily wardrobe had been replaced with theirs. I was still too skinny, and after weeks of being denied my clothing at the cabin, my old clothing was still a bitter reminder. It also made me ashamed of my body in some ways. In their clothes, I felt

anonymous and they gave me a false sense of feeling like I could "hide."

"I'm the one who asked for this… talk." Golden frowned.

"Yet," I sighed, "you're still on your phone. I thought we were heading in a good direction. Since I came back, I feel like it's constantly stuck in your hand. I'm not normally an insecure person−" I scrambled off my bed and hugged myself in agitation "—but I can't help but wonder who or what is more important than your family or me. Even Maisie's noticed your preoccupation. She's been all but begging for your attention.

"I wanna believe you're not talking to Madison or any other girl, but I can't help but believe only a female would have the audacity to text you at the strangest times of the night. I can't even sleep next to you without the damn thing vibrating every half an hour or so. Were you always this attached to your phone before I came along? Was this who you were before I knew you? Because insecure or not, I'd like to be the center of your attention when we're watching a movie together. I would hope we could get through one family dinner without you getting up to answer your phone or scrolling through it."

He then made a point to set his phone down on the nightstand. "I'm sorry if that's how my behavior makes you feel, and I will make an effort to focus more on you and our family. That is if you are still in this with me. As I said, I know you say you want to be with me, but I feel like you'll never forgive me for Madison kissing me. Lucas accuses me of something with no real evidence, and all of a sudden, the progress we made is gone."

"I already told you that I was going to try," I muttered. "It doesn't mean I like talking about Madison. I know you didn't initiate the conversation in the hot tub, but you just sat there. You didn't even defend yourself or explain to me why Lucas was under the impression you flirted with her."

"I still feel like I'm on the outskirts," he admitted. "When you were taken, Madison was there for me. Lochlann and Kyler were always getting your image and story out there in the hopes someone saw something. They threw themselves into finding you and calling every resource available to find you outside of the FBI. Crew and Zane

became obsessed with working out even though they were playing like shit on the field. Paxton would barely speak to me."

He tapped his chest with a fist. "I had *no one*. Loch and Ky wouldn't let me leave school and help them. I couldn't or wouldn't break up the testosterone-driven brouhaha between Zane and Crew. As much as I love them and as much as I enjoyed running with them once upon a time, we never bonded over lifting weights and shit. And Paxton… he would deny it now, but I knew he blamed me for not getting to you faster. He wouldn't even speak to me unless I outright asked him a question."

He sighed and continued. "When Madison and I became friends, it was like a God-send. I finally had someone to talk to, and she was a great listener. She would tell me stories about you, and I felt closer to you. I never even saw the warning signs of her attraction to me. I mean, she was extra-flirty, but she's always been, and I was friendly, but I know− *I know*− I never encouraged her attraction. How was I supposed to stop something I never saw coming?

"Like I explained before, when you returned and I saw the state you were in, I was eyeballs' deep in my guilt once more. At that point, Madison apologized for coming onto me and told me she wanted to be friends− *just* friends. And like a drowning man, I took that life raft because, once again, I felt like my family blamed me for the condition you were in."

His face was pained as he paused to look at me. "I was *there*, Peyton. I was a few feet away from you, and I couldn't get to you in time. Sure, I realize my phone has become a shield of sorts to me, and I'll make a conscious effort not to play with it as often, but will that make things better? Can you find it in your heart to forgive me and try to forget, or am I just spinning my wheels? My mind hasn't changed. I still want you, even knowing you're with my brothers but… do you still want *me*?"

I took in all his words, feeling the sincerity of it all.

I believed him. Even if my mind wanted to conjure up more arguments, my heart yearned for him.

In these moments, I realized more than ever that I wasn't the only one affected by my abduction. Golden would forever carry the guilt of it with him. I couldn't even imagine how it had felt for him. But I knew

it was pointless to point out to him that he had no involvement or culpability in what had happened to me; his guilt wouldn't listen, even though he was never at fault.

I nodded slowly. "I believe you. I know how Madison can be when she sets her sights on something or someone," I said the last bit a touch too dryly. "It's one of the reasons I love− loved− her. It's hard knowing she came onto you. It was hard getting over how I felt when I first returned. All I wanted was all my guys near me. You were the reasons I kept fighting. When I returned, I saw how close you two were. I heard you playing the guitar for her. I felt betrayed, like what we had wasn't as special if you were doing it for her, too. You guys seemed to be in your own bubble and I wasn't invited.

"I know now that you felt guilty about me being taken right in front of you. I realize you took comfort in her devoted presence, but it still stings sometimes. You have to forgive yourself, too, Golden. You're not responsible for what those men planned and did to me. If we're going to move forward and have a healthy relationship, we both have to work on it. I *do* still want you, but you need to stop using your phone as an escape. I'm right here. Your *family* is right here."

He visibly gulped before he pulled me into his arms and held me in close. I felt the slight tremor in his arms as he buried his head in the crook of my neck.

"It's going to take some time for the guilt to disappear, but I can definitely stop using my phone as a crutch," he breathed out. "I've been trying to stay busy, so I'm not in my head as much. I began going through some of the prints my mom never published and selling them online. Oddly enough," he looks at me, sadness crossing his features, "she permitted us to do so in her will. We just never knew what to do with them. There seemed to be no point in it, especially since we got money from their life insurance policies and still receive monthly income with the rentals and the shop.

"Then I realized, since their wills were made a few months before Maisie's and Clay's adoptions were final, they never made sure the kids were set up like the rest of us were. I wanted to start something for them without putting more pressure on our financial

advisor. So, I opened bank accounts for Clay and Maisie, and everything that's been sold has been going into their accounts."

I pulled away from him and frowned before he rushed ahead.

"The notification sounds you probably hear, Peyton, the ones late at night, are buyers. Sure, I won't deny that none of them hasn't been a text from Madison." He grimaced, but then looked thoughtful. "You know, I think Lucas is right. I think something traumatic happened to her. I had once picked up on it, but she wouldn't tell me anything. She *does* use drinking as a coping mechanism. She likes to drunk-text me. I've never encouraged her behavior, and I've tried to tell her I can't be there for her anymore. I can't even be her friend if that means losing you or if it gives her the wrong idea. So, I've decided to block her number, and if you want, I'll let you look through my phone.

He reached over then and handed me his phone. It took me a moment to realize he had his text messages opened.

I shook my head adamantly. If I was going to forgive him for something he was never at fault over, then it had to start now. I had to trust him, and it had to start now, especially if I wanted to continue being in a relationship with him.

"No." I gently pushed his hand away. "I trust you, Golden." I looked up into his golden eyes and made sure he could see the sincerity in mine. "I don't have to read them." I leaned into him, feeling at peace with us, so that, finally, I relaxed into his thin but muscular build, reveling in our closeness. I replayed all his words before I pulled back to look at him. "Now, tell me about your side-gig. Do the others know?"

At the same time I asked, the door to the bedroom opened.

"Know what?" Paxton asked as he came into the room holding a bowl of apple crumble and vanilla ice cream in his hands. It was nearly the size of a serving bowl.

Golden coughed and gave me a sheepish look before he shook his head and attempted a smile. "Nothing," he said quickly.

I nodded in understanding before I mock-glared at Paxton. "I hope you didn't eat it all. That's a serving bowl, not a normal bowl! I want some, too. Can you get me some?" I asked sweetly.

Paxton gave a suspicious look before he shrugged. “Sure, but there’s one more pan left. Let’s go eat, then watch a movie.”

“Okay,” I said brightly.

We waited until he left before Golden murmured. “Loch and Ky know, but we wanted to wait for the right time to tell Pax. He can be funny with things like this. I didn’t want him to think I was crowding in an area that had once been his and Mam’s, and Pax can be too sentimental to understand that Mam loved sharing her art with others. He shouldn’t hoard it to himself.

I somewhat understood why they wouldn’t want to break the news immediately to Paxton. I could see him being reluctant to sell his mom’s work, even if he would have the original images.

I didn’t particularly appreciate keeping secrets of any kind, but maybe this one should be held onto for a little while longer. Paxton was still recovering from my abduction and return. He probably needed a bit more time before more emotional issues were thrown his way.

5

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Pointe Shoes

Da once had a reality television show. He found vehicles in need of restoration, fixed them, and sold them. Admittedly, I had watched the show from time to time because Lucas and his dad Mickey had been obsessed with it, but I never paid much attention. Now that I stood in a place that Da had once stood, it made me feel like I was standing on hallowed ground.

This was a place he utilized to produce not one, but *six*, upstanding, admirable men. Da not only became a positive influence on his natural-born son and adopted sons, but he also had a considerable hand in the men that Kyler, Crew, and Zane became as well. They would be the first people to tell you that, without the presence of their fathers, Da had stepped up to be the male role model they needed in their lives.

Da had never once made them feel like they were charity cases or unworthy of the love they deserved. He included them in outings and teaching lessons he had for Lochlann, Golden, and Paxton. He taught them how a woman should be treated and made sure their “idle” hands were always busy doing constructive things.

I honestly believed they wouldn’t have become half the men they were without the love and attention Da had given them.

“As I live and breathe, you brought the whole crew and then some!” I heard a loud, cheery voice call out.

I looked up and noticed a man that was easily the height of Kyler and Crew exiting an office-looking area. Although he wasn’t nearly as fit as they were and was rocking a “dad bod,” you could tell he was an active man.

“Hey, Ronnie.” Lochlann smiled before holding out his hand in welcome. “It was only supposed to be a few of us,” he said dryly. “But then it turned into this.” He held his arms out to encompass us all.

I had overheard Kyler and Lochlann talking this morning, so I knew there was a ghost crew today at the shop. Lochlann ensured that a majority of the employees were given the day off. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out it was because of me. For once, I didn't mind. This was just another baby step for me into the real world.

"I'm sure I can find work for them all!" Ronnie gave him a broad, teasing smile.

Lochlann chuckled. "Good. They came to work."

Except for Renee, Maisie, and Clay, we were all here this morning, including Lucas. It was the first time Golden, Paxton, Crew, and Zane had come since Da had passed away. They had been fixtures around here, especially last year, but after Da died they found it very difficult to visit. The place held too many memories for them, and it devastated them knowing he would never walk through those doors with them again.

Golden made a scoffing noise but had a smile curving his lips. "Speak for yourself. I came to watch the guys work."

Even though Golden was joking around, I could clearly see how hard it was for him to be here. Out of my peripheral, I could see Paxton's jaw tick as he played with his tongue ring. As excited as they were to come, I didn't think they realized how hard it would be for them in reality. There had been a noticeable change on the drive here, the closer we got to the shop. Talking had ceased, and I'd noticed how most of them had withdrawn into themselves.

So on the way, I had found myself trying to lend them my silent support. I had held Golden's hand as I leaned against Paxton. Not that it was easier on the others or that they didn't need my encouragement, but it seemed to have hit them the hardest.

Lochlann and Kyler had attempted to distract them during the drive, but it hadn't quite worked. Lucas− bless his heart− hadn't felt the shift in emotions, of course, and hadn't stopped gushing. He was fanboying it hard. He never believed he would ever be able to visit Transport Transportations. Apparently, when they were still airing new shows, the shop had been damn near impossible to get into.

Da had to have security and had erected a fence around the entire perimeter due to overzealous fans. Da generally located and

purchased the vehicles with Ronnie and Bob− his business manager and head mechanic, respectfully− before fixing them up and selling them. Still, occasionally private vehicle owners wanted their expertise as well. Sometimes a few of these vehicle enthusiasts got out of hand and had tried to force their way to the front of the line. They ignored the fact that Da generally tried to do first-in, first-out, unless he was waiting for parts and such.

“I see Pretty Boy Goldie is still afraid to get his hands too dirty!” A young guy in his mid-to-late twenties strode into the lobby wiping his hands on a rag.

He was a good-looking guy, in a rugged sort of way, with black hair and bright hazel eyes. I could immediately tell he knew about his good looks. But even if I didn’t have the guys, I wouldn’t be attracted to him, no matter how cute he was.

Golden snorted. “Who’s calling who a pretty boy? You wear more gel in your hair in a day than I do a year!”

Crew laughed and walked forward to meet the guy, giving him a hug.

I rarely saw Crew click with anyone outside of our family, so his enthusiastic greeting surprised me.

“Got ‘em there,” Ronnie chortled.

The new guy gave Ronnie a disgruntled look before grinning at us. “We have three cars in the bay. I know there’s no way you’re all here to watch one li'l 'ol bike get painted.” He was laughing as he looked at us all, and then his gaze settled on me. His smile slipped for a moment.

I wasn’t naïve; I knew Lochlann had told them I was coming and had prepared them just in case, but it still made me feel uneasy. My face was plastered on all major networks for weeks. You had to be living under a rock not to recognize my face.

I braced myself for the look of pity or scrutiny.

He composed his features quickly before he gave me a sincere smile. “Painting a bike will be a first for us. What’s a pretty girl like you doing riding on that death trap?”

Crew grunted. “Says the man who rides. Stop flirting, Chad, and help get my girl’s bike off the trailer outside.”

Chad threw his hands up in mock surrender. “Can you blame me?” He leaned in towards me with a conspiratorial look. “If you ever want to upgrade and be with a real man, I’ll give you my number.”

I gaped at him for a moment before my lips curved up wickedly. There was something about him that made me feel the spark of my old self, along with the desire for that self to finally emerge.

I could see Paxton was attempting to push him away, but deep down I was appreciative that Chad obviously knew who I was and wasn’t treating me like fragile glass. It was so refreshing. In my brief forays in the real world, I felt like I was being pitied, or worse, when people were too awkward around me. As if they had to behave a certain way around me.

“If I’m upgrading to a real man, why would I need your number?” I mockingly tapped my mouth with my pointer finger.

Chad’s mouth dropped before the lobby erupted in laughter. I felt and smelled Kyler before I felt him tap my waist in a warning. His arms wrap around me from behind. He lifted me and kissed my temple, chuckling. “Burn!”

“It’s sad she met you for less than two minutes and already has your number, Chad. Not your phone number, though!” Ronnie wiped real tears of laughter from his eyes. “Now, get to work. I’m not paying you to stand here, and they want to leave sometime today.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Chad gave me a mock look of hurt before turning. “I’m hurt that you don’t see my potential, but I’m sure I can change your mind. Let’s go check out your bike. Loch let me know some of your interests, so I created a few designs. I hope you like them.”

When he placed a hand on the small of my back, for a brief second I tensed, but then I felt myself relaxing. It was nice to pretend I was normal for a few moments.

Chad chuckled wickedly as Crew nearly growled at him.

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“Just like that,” Chad instructed me as I sprayed the primer onto my gas tank.

Chad was a flirt and seemed to take evil joy from seeing how far he could push Paxton and Crew, who were the only ones who

had accompanied me back to the “painting booth.” Paxton was busy snapping away on the camera, while Crew seemed to be there to keep Chad in line.

Lochlann had gone up to the offices to discuss business with their business manager and Ronnie. The others were helping the two employees working on the three vehicles they had in the bays. Surprisingly, I had even caught Cooper getting his hands dirty, right after I had run out to retrieve bottles of water after we had sanded down the parts of my bike I was painting.

I was determined to do as much work on my bike as possible. It didn’t take long for Crew and me to strip it so the three of us could begin sanding it down, which also hadn’t taken long with the right equipment.

“This is going to look so hot.” Paxton whistled as he took a picture of the stencil we were going to use for my bike.

I had to admit Chad had an excellent artistic eye. He had designed a pair of pointe shoes with the ribbons morphing into musical notes and flames. It was a beautiful balance of being feminine but not enough to make it overly girly. I loved it.

Earlier, on his laptop, Chad had shown me the idea he’d had with the paint scheme. I chose black as my primary color, with the accents in several shades of blue. I was so excited to see the finished product. Unfortunately, I wouldn’t be able to take it home with me by Sunday afternoon. The drying time and detail work would take at least a week.

I wouldn’t have minded picking her back up, but then I was reminded that I had my first competition next weekend. It almost made me have a panic attack with the thought of how my life was resuming on Monday. I couldn’t wait to get back to dance, but I didn’t want to see Bailey and her entourage. Sure, high school would engage my mind again, but then I’d have to see Madison and Leah.

It was hard to believe her suspension had gone by that quickly. Then again, it wasn’t like my life had been on the course it had been. Unlike Claire, David was allowing Leah to return to school. Apparently, she had taken her tutoring seriously and had all her assignments turned in, as well as her past work completed. Some of her teachers had even allowed her to retake quizzes and tests.

“Do you mind if I take pictures and post them on my social media pages once it's completed?” Chad asked as he buffed my bike’s pipes.

He primarily worked paint in the shop but was also known to help out in the main building from time to time. It didn’t take long for him to convince me that a buff and polish job on my chrome would complete the new look for my bike.

“I don’t mind,” I said with a shrug.

The longer I worked with him, the more I realized that Da had a hand in his “upbringing” too. He had reminisced, telling me many stories of Mam and Da as we worked, and it was the first time Paxton didn’t walk off. It warmed my heart to see him participate in the conversation with Crew and Chad.

According to him, Chad had never met his father, and his mother prostituted to put food on the table. By the time he was ten, he’d fallen in with the wrong crowd. He was determined to help his mother out by earning money as well. Unfortunately, his new friends had him stealing stuff for them. He had been in and out of juvie three times by the time he was sixteen.

When he got out the last time, his crew heard about a car shop with thousands of dollars of merchandise in their warehouse. Chad was sent in, assuming the shop was closed. Little did he know that the owner was there that weekend, with two of his sons and their friends. Da had called the cops, but instead of pressing charges, he worked out a deal with Chad.

“Awesome, no drips,” Chad broke into my wandering thoughts. “What do you think?”

He held up the sissy bar I was going to install on my bike. My old one didn’t have one, but after seeing how Crew and Kyler utilized theirs, I thought it would be a nice touch.

“I like it.” I smiled at the shine on it.

Chad gave me a grin and a wink before he pulled down his safety glasses. Once again, I marveled at how open he was about his past. There was no shame or embarrassment at the life he’d led before he was taken in, and he told his story so matter of factly.

Chad told me how he had to stop by the shop every day after school and help clean or do any other task assigned to him. If he

didn’t show up, Da hunted him down. It took him a while to figure out what motivated him. Eventually, he found out about his mother and their situation.

Da showed Chad an apartment they owned near his old neighborhood, but it was clean, and the area had a low crime rate. Da made him promise to leave his friends behind and would allow Chad and his mother to live there for a fraction of the standard price. It had worked for a little while, but then his mother returned to her old life.

She wasn’t content working at the “normal” job that Da found for her. She didn’t like the rehab programs she was put in. She wanted the easy money prostituting afforded her. Plus, her clients frequently provided her with the drugs she was hooked on. Eventually, one of her johns killed her.

Chad had fallen back in with his old crowd once more, but Da didn’t give up on him. Mam and Da had even fostered him for some time. They would have adopted him, but Chad never wanted that. He just wanted a safe place to call home.

It was when Chad was living with them that Mam realized how artistically talented he was. She saw his drawings and his interest in graphic design and convinced Da to send him to workshops that revolved around design for high schoolers.

For a little while, he had thrived, until his old friends hunted him down. They wanted him to break into the safe of the only man that had given him so many opportunities and who had shown him what love really looked like. Chad learned he couldn’t straddle both sides of the fence. He confided in Da.

It was all history after that. It had been a process, and it wasn’t easy, Chad had said, but his old life was now in the rearview mirror.

He rose in the ranks at the shop, became the primary painter, and made more than enough money to purchase his quaint house on his town's outskirts. Listening to him talk and watching the way he held himself, I would have never thought he ever had it “rough.” It just showed me, once more, you really couldn’t judge a book by its cover.

“Maybe I should drop the bike off myself when it’s ready.” Chad wagged his eyebrows at me. “I’ll take you on a date, Peyton. Does Romano’s still have the best pizza around? I’ll take you there. My room still open there, Pax?”

The only time I saw Chad’s mask slip was when he discussed regretting not visiting more often. Even though he lived an hour and a half away, he admitted to being a workaholic, and since he worked with Da, and the others visited the shop from time to time, he never saw the necessity in visiting that often.

He barely knew Clay, and the last holiday he’d spent with them was Christmas. He visited his ex’s family for Easter, and now that they were broken up, he was upset that he’d wasted the last major holiday with them. Apparently, many of the adults who had been fostered by the Isaacs came back to visit on the major holidays.

It was a surprise to me, and it was clear that Paxton, Crew, and Chad were uncertain how Thanksgiving would look this year. It was evident that they liked the tradition, but without Mam’s driving force and Da helping where she needed him to, it might be something that would end for good.

“Peyton has a competition this Saturday, and no, your room is now the guest room, as it has been for years.” Paxton scowled at him.

“I never said next week. I can come later.” Chad grinned.

I snorted, realizing he was goading Paxton once more. It was time for my mic drop moment. “I’m exclusive to my boyfriends, plus you might be a little too old for me. But you’re more than welcome to visit if the guys want you to.”

Chad seemed momentarily taken aback.

The paint room doors opened, and Kyler came inside. He stopped to admire the gas tank I had just spray-painted. He whistled low. “She’s going to be beautiful like you.” He grasped my chin gently before placing a kiss on my lips.

“Thanks,” I said, mildly embarrassed as Chad faded into the background of my thoughts.

“Lunch should be here soon,” Kyler informed us next before taking a seat on one of the extended workbenches. “I forgot how

much I loved working on those old machines," he said to no one in particular. "Maybe I should open up a garage in town and start flipping cars on the side."

Crew good-naturedly snorted before he shook his head. "Do you even have extra time, to begin with? You are currently working on three homes, and I know you're going to a few auctions in the next couple of weeks for more homes."

Kyler smiled smugly with a shrug. "Who says I actually have to be in the shop all the time? I'm sure I can find someone to run it most of the time."

"You're stretched thin as it is," Paxton scoffed.

"Kitten?" he inquired as if he wanted my opinion.

"I think you should sleep on it," I replied non-committedly.

I was touched that he was asking my opinion to begin with. However, I had to agree with Paxton and Crew. Kyler already had enough on his plate without adding more to it. He worked so much, and I was afraid it would catch up to him eventually.

He grinned at me and nodded. "True. I can be impulsive sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Crew mocked.

Kyler chuckled. "Most of the time," he said with a careless shrug.

I really didn't think he was that reckless. However, I had seen him jump on a listing and make decisions before his inspector had a say in it. Luckily, it hadn't bit him in the butt yet. *Yet* being the operative word.

Golden came striding into the room next. "Lunch is here."

He no longer had his button-up on, and his gray t-shirt was now covered in grease. His jeans were precariously hanging off his slim hips, and they were just as dirty. I found it sexy to see him so… messy. Since our discussion last night, I had a feeling we definitely were heading in the right direction. I hadn't seen him on his phone once since then.

There was also a new light in his eyes. I knew some people might have thought I'd forgiven him too quickly, but how long should a person pay for someone else's actions? Plus, I understood why he behaved the way he had since my return. In a twisted way.

He stopped beside me, and I smiled as I removed the rag from his hand.

“Hungry?” he inquired.

He had a grease streak across his forehead. I gently tried to remove it, and he gave me a soft smile in return. The shadows were still there, but he was fighting them as hard as I was.

My stomach made a noise as if to remind me that it was in dire need of sustenance.

“Starving,” I admitted. I was so thankful for my returning appetite.

He leaned down and kissed me. When his tongue skimmed my lips, I readily opened mine. My tongue entwined with his, and I could taste the cheap coffee the shop had in their break room. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it did make me long for a caramel hazelnut latte.

When he grabbed the back of my neck to tilt it back, all thoughts of coffee were dashed away. I missed this. I missed him. I was so glad we chose each other. Again.

Our tongues tangled, and I felt a low burn begin in my stomach. I really, really needed to get laid.

“You’re fucking with me,” I heard Chad mutter loudly.

I pulled back and smiled abashedly. I forgot Chad was even here.

“Nope,” Paxton said a bit smugly. “She’s our girlfriend.”

“You share her?” Chad asked with a touch of horror.

I didn’t take offense at his question. It wasn’t asked in judgment or disgust. It was more with mystified shock. Our situation wasn’t normal and wouldn’t make sense to most people.

Chad looked at Paxton, then me; Kyler, then me; Golden, then me; Crew, then me once more. His jaw dropped.

“Don’t overthink it, bro.” Kyler chuckled. “It works for us, and it’s no different than when you were dating Stephanie, Stacey, and Heather a few years ago.”

“But they didn’t know about each other.” Chad shook his head in disbelief.

“Which makes it worse,” Crew stated before he took my hand. “We know and we’re okay with it. Let’s feed you, angel. Breakfast

was hours ago."

"Don't make this awkward, man," Paxton said with mischief in his eyes. "Otherwise Thanksgiving's going to be super weird this year." He almost seemed to take delight in unsettling the older guy, just as Chad had been doing to him all morning long.

"Time out, two questions. One, we're still having Thanksgiving this year?" Chad seemed excited about the prospect before he smirked at Paxton. "And two, how did she convince you all to share. Especially you, Pax. I still remember what a little shit you were. You used to hide everything on all the other kids. In fact, you were the only kid Mam and Da allowed to put a lock on their door so no one would touch your stuff without permission."

Golden, Crew, and Kyler chuckled.

"Oh, he's still a hoarding shithead," Golden teased. "And she didn't convince us. We convinced her."

We all started making our way towards the breakroom. I took Golden's proffered hand and let him lead me. He squeezed it and grinned at me.

"He stopped locking his door when we didn't touch, *or care,* about his crap," Crew smirked.

Paxton rolled his eyes. "I'm not that bad anymore," he said in a disgruntled voice. "And yeah, I think we should do Thanksgiving this year. It will be… nice." He seemed hesitant for a moment. "I'm sure we can find places that cater for Thanksgiving."

"Or… I can cook," I offered. "I used to help Yoon on the Thanksgivings I had over there. Mind if I invite Mickey and Lucas? I'm sure Grandpa has a full house and his own plans this year."

"I'll get Zane to contact the rest of the family," Kyler volunteered. "Plus, Loch and I can be your sous chefs."

"For what?" Lochlann asked as we entered the breakroom.

The smell of fried onions and green peppers met my nose before seeing the party-size sub and cheesesteak. My mouth watered at the thought of a cheesesteak sandwich. It had been some time since I'd had one.

"Thanksgiving's gonna be at the house this year," Golden explained as he picked up a plate and handed it to me. "Zane will

reach out to the others. You and Ky are helping Peyton in the kitchen."

"Are you sure?" Loch looked at me, then Paxton.

"Mam would want that," Paxton said resolutely.

And as much as the thought of being in a crowded house with strangers made me wary, I realized how important it was to the guys. I nodded firmly. I hadn't realized how much Mam and Da left a hole in other people's lives until today. Chad may not have been as close to the guys as they were to each other, but he was still family. This would be the first time in ten years that he had no "home" to return to on Thanksgiving and Christmas.

He was just one of many that may never have wanted to be adopted or wasn't adopted by the Isaacs,' but they still had a considerable impact on their lives. It always amazed me the new things I was learning about the complexities of their lives before coming into it.

"It's been a while since I've celebrated Thanksgiving with other people," I admitted before turning to Lucas. His mouth was full, but I could see him attempting to talk.

The last couple of years, mom worked, Sean disappeared, and Lucas and Mickey ended up traveling to Lucas' brother's college for the holidays. Since Yoon had passed away, they didn't celebrate holidays the same. Madison would invite me on occasion, but her family liked taking vacations to places like Greece, Paris, and the Bahamas over school holidays.

"You're invited and so is your dad," I said, aptly interpreting his look.

I knew his older brother wouldn't mind. He was so self-absorbed, and nowadays he seemed almost annoyed by his dad and brother. Yoon had been the glue to hold their family together. Now with her gone, he wasn't even going to attempt to pretend family meant anything to him anymore.

"Sweet," Lucas gushed. "I can't wait. I'll tell dad now…" He started to rush out of the room.

"It's still like a month and a half away," I protested with a laugh.

He ignored me as he bounded forward.

I laughed once more and shook my head.

“I’ll start reaching out to the others.” Zane smiled warmly at me. “If you’re sure?”

I nodded. “I’m sure.”

I still had a long way to go to reach a “normal” level, but I had to make goals and work towards them, otherwise, the darkness lurking at the edges would continue to pursue me. It was best to acclimate quickly and stay busy so it wouldn’t consume me.

“Sweet!” Chad said excitedly with a sub raised to his mouth. “I get to see my future sister-in-law with her harem, and I get front row seats when the others realize what’s going on.”

“Chad,” Crew and Kyler growled out together as the others, not in our family, looked at him in confusion.

Chad chuckled and winked at me. “I swear it’s never dull in the Isaacs’ household, and I remember when we had that homicidal kid with Tourettes living with us.”

I looked over at Lochlann, who grimaced and shrugged.

Wow. That was another story I wanted to hear about.

“Have room in your harem, beautiful?” Chad grinned at me.

I heard Crew and Kyler growl once more, and I wavered between embarrassment and annoyance by him placing me in the spotlight in front of my Shadows and the other men that had come into work today.

I smiled guilelessly and shook my head at him. “Sorry, it’s full, and I already told you I’m only interested in real men.”

The room erupted in laughter once more, and I winked at him as he gave me a mock crestfallen look.

He shrugged. “I’m still dropping the bike off myself.”

“You’re really pushing your luck, Chad.” Golden smirked at him. “I didn’t forget how much you dislike mice. I’ll go to the pet store and release them in your room if you continue to hit on my girl.”

Chad's face lost color. “That’s cold, man.” He shuddered, then scowled at Golden.

“Do you remember when that little one got into the painting booth last month?” Ronnie chuckled as he elbowed one of the other employees, who laughed.

“Screamed like a little girl,” the guy said.

We all laughed at Chad's expense, and it felt so good to feel this at ease in front of new people. None of them seemed to dissect me or made me feel uncomfortable. For that, I was thankful.

"Mice are creepy," Sal muttered.

More laughter ensued.

"It would be nice to take a road trip." Ronnie smiled. "You have room for us, Loch?"

"We have a competition to attend this coming weekend, then Homecoming the week after. How about three weeks from now?" Loch looked over at me.

I nodded in agreement.

"And you know we have plenty of room. Even for you, Chad." Lochlann grinned at the other man.

"I'll get a hotel room, but I'm still delivering the bike," Chad muttered mutinously.

Once again, laughter lit up the breakroom. The guys were ruthless as they teased Chad.

They began talking about the delivery and visit details as I finally took a bite of my sandwich. I spent the rest of lunch listening to the easy camaraderie between the men. When I was nearly finished, I realized I wasn't the only one that needed this outing: the guys seemed to have needed it just as much.

It was just a bonus that we were doing it together and "healing" as one.

6

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Breathe with Me

The weekend went by entirely too fast. It felt like I had barely blinked and it was Sunday night.

Now back home, I had just put Clay down for the night while Maisie was in the shower. Her music was blaring, and I knew I had the unpleasant task of asking her to turn it down once more.

She had just discovered a love for music within the last week or so. I believed Golden felt some residual guilt for ignoring her, so he had purchased a small mp3 player. Later, she'd confiscated Paxton's Bluetooth speaker and conned him into syncing it with her mp3 player.

She was growing up way too fast. Over the last few weeks, she also decided that baths were "babyish" and wanted to take showers, which wouldn't be so bad if she didn't insist on spending hours in there as well. I wasn't ready for these teenage tendencies quite yet. If she was exhibiting this type of… attitude now, I was frightened to see how she behaved once hormones raged through her body.

Lochlann came out of his room and gave me a rueful smile as I gently closed Clay's door behind me. He shook his head at me in silent commiseration and gently knocked on the bathroom door right as Maisie started belting out, off-key, the lyrics of *Lose You To Love Me* by Selena Gomez. It was so loud, and she was butchering the words. I covered my mouth to contain my giggle as she sang words that were definitely not in the song.

Lochlann chuckled too before he opened the door. "Hey, Mai?" he called out. "I'm turning down your music, and you need to sing quietly so you don't wake up your brother."

"Get out!" she immediately squealed. "No boys allowed! I need my privacy."

Lochlann sighed deeply before pushing his glasses up with his thumb and forefinger to rub the bridge of his nose in vexation. “I’m not ready for this,” he muttered. “I thought I had a few more years yet.”

I laughed once more. “I got this.” I stepped into the room. “Hey, Mai?” I called out louder. “I’m turning down your music and checking on your mop.”

By mop, I meant her hair. Maisie’s hair was outrageously long and fell to her waist. It was also super thick, so she tended to leave shampoo or conditioner in it because she didn’t know how to wash it properly quite yet.

“Thanks,” Lochlann muttered before he began to turn away.

I grabbed his wrist. “Can I sleep with you tonight?” I inquired.

We rarely shared the same bed. I think Lochlann was still cautious about being caught, especially with my Shadows in the house. We had finally convinced them to take the apartments above the garage tonight. I was slightly salty when Cooper went over my head and asked Grandpa if it was permissible not to be directly in the same household as me.

After this weekend, I thought we had made some headway. Cooper seemed more relaxed and laid back than I had ever seen him, and I’m pretty sure a bromance had formed between Sal and Kyler. Unfortunately, Cooper was back in timeout for me. Little Snitch.

I was just thankful Grandpa assured him that it was more than copasetic for them to move out there with the other security measures we installed. He even suggested that they work out a schedule to take a couple of days off a week, and either mornings or evenings off. He informed them that they didn’t need to be on duty twenty-four seven.

“I’d love that,” Lochlann murmured before placing a kiss on my forehead.

“Get out!” Maisie shrieked once more. “No boys!”

I turned to see her mutinous expression, and sure enough, soap suds clung to the crown of her hair. We wanted to let her exercise her independence, but we realized it would take some time before we felt confident that she could handle some tasks without

supervision. Showers were one of her undertakings, but she was adamant that none of the guys help her any longer.

I supported her decision to keep her “privates” private, but it made it harder for me since I was the only female in the house. I didn’t mind it, but I learned how to time her showers now, so it didn’t interfere with my sleep schedule or interrupt anything else I had going on.

Lochlann gave me another crooked grin and a loud sigh. “See you in a little bit,” he murmured.

I smiled back at him. “I’ll come to your room after I get my stuff ready for tomorrow,” I said quietly in return.

We still were super careful what we said and did in front of Maisie. She was way too observant and had a motor mouth. I could imagine her little butt telling her teacher about Loch and me. Until we figured out a plan of how this was all going to work, we needed to be discreet.

I knew Lochlann had some kind of plan; I just didn’t know what it was yet.

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After taking my shower and packing my dance and school bag, I slipped back upstairs. The house was relatively quiet, and I knew everyone had sought out their rooms. Even with a house full of people, it was almost eerily quiet.

Since my return, Kyler, Crew, and Zane had chosen their rooms here. I really appreciated their presence, despite the fact they had their own homes. I knew Kyler and Crew would go home from time to time to check on it or pick up some stuff, but they were here the majority of the time. As for Zane, I couldn’t remember the last time he ran home for anything.

After school, he saw his mother on the days he taught classes or didn’t have a late practice. It seemed to be enough for Anya.

I was surprised that Anya hadn’t seemed to mind when Zane essentially told her that he was moving in here for an indefinite period. Her ability to recognize our mutual desire to be near each other truly touched my heart. She was rising in esteem in my eyes the more I got to know her.

After Yoon, she was probably the second most significant female role model ever to grace my life. I loved my previous dance instructor, but she hadn't seemed to care about my personal life as much as Anya did. I couldn't forget her support of my relationships and judgment-free approach to them as well.

I finally reached Lochlann's room, and my hand was poised over the door to knock when he unexpectedly opened the door. My initial reaction was fear, but then it turned into amazement. I had rarely seen him without his glasses, and his eyes were brilliantly blue without the reflection of the glass.

Don't get me wrong, he was sexy as hell with them on; but without them, there was no barrier to prevent me from appreciating the blue of his eyes. His eyelashes were surprisingly long and dark for his fairer coloring.

He must have asked me something, but I was unable to compute his words. I was too dumbfounded by his natural beauty.

"You have beautiful long lashes," I blurted out in semi-embarrassment.

It wasn't the only thing beautiful on him. He was already dressed for bed, or should I say undressed. His lean, sculpted chest was on display, and his dedication to lifting weights and working out was evident. His pajama bottoms were just low enough to show his tempting Adonis belt. I didn't know if it was just him or my forced celibacy that made me acutely feel my desire. I had a feeling that, with or without being celibate for the last few weeks, his lack of dress would still have made that burn of hunger deep in the pit of my stomach.

He chuckled, interrupting my ogling before he reached out for my hand and led me towards the king-size bed that nearly dominated one of his walls. In my absence, he'd hired Kyler's new interior decorator. He had made his parent's old room into his own.

Paxton and Golden readily agreed with it and told him that, since he was the estates' executor, he had every right to make that decision.

With that decision made, he couldn't comfortably sleep in the room the way his parents had left it. His master suite had less feminine touches and had a more masculine modern vibe without

feeling like you were overdosing on testosterone. It was sleek, clean, and had undercurrents of warmth like the man himself.

"I have to trim my lashes constantly," he informed me sheepishly. "They rub against my glasses frequently and annoy the crap out of me."

I laughed, imagining him with a pair of cuticle scissors trimming his eyelashes. "It's such a shame to let them go to waste," I teased. "Have you tried wearing contacts?"

He folded the blanket down on my side before he slipped in on his side. It took me a second to realize he seemed chagrined by the question.

"Promise you won't laugh?" He gave me a lopsided tilt to his lips.

I held up the universal sign for scout's honor even though I had never been a scout. He softly chuckled before I saw him physically swallow.

"I hate eyeballs," he muttered, nearly unintelligible.

I had to hide my laugh of disbelief. "I'm sorry." I cleared my throat. "Did you just say that you hate eyeballs?"

He rolled his eyes at me with a smirk. "Yes," he said in exasperation. "I freak out over eyeballs. When I try to put in contacts, I can't physically do it."

I couldn't help it. The visual Lochlann's words evoked was entirely too much. I began to giggle. I tried to stop. Honestly, the look on Loch's face had me laughing once more. I curled in on myself. I held my stomach as it literally began to hurt. I tried to catch my breath. And for the first time in a long time, I felt the laughter wasn't just surface laughter, but the kind of laughter born from the depths of my soul.

"Knock it off," Lochlann mock growled before he launched himself across the bed. He put me on my back, captured my hands, and pinned them above my head before straddling my hips. "If this is the way you react when I reveal my deepest darkest fears, I won't tell you anymore."

Lochlann was generally my most serious man. He was always so austere and carried the weight of his family and all our problems on his shoulders. He was such a stark contrast to Kyler; it was hard

to believe that they were best friends. Kyler hid his demons behind his flirting and jokes, but Lochlann masked his with stoicism and seriousness.

I loved seeing these brief glimpses of his playful side. I loved watching him lower his guard. It was so uncommon, and I basked in this rare glow.

The look on his face made me laugh harder as I tried to buck him off with an upwards thrust of my hips.

"*I* can't believe you get creeped out by eyeballs. *I* can't see it," I continued, laughing at my continual use of *I* in its other context. "*I* can't believe you can't place a thin lens in your *eye*, but you can use scissors so close to your *eye*."

He found a spot right above my hips that was incredibly ticklish and sensitive.

"Nooo!" I howled in protest.

"It's not nice to laugh at people's phobias," he grunted as he continued to tickle me.

"Please stop," I gasped. "You're going to make me pee myself. *I* promise I'll stop," I wheezed between laughter.

"I don't think you will," he said relentlessly.

The need to pee was genuine, and my sides and face were hurting from laughter.

"Please, Loch," I whined as I tried to buck him off again. "*I* will!"

I continued to thrash, and he continued to hold me down. When my core rubbed against his groin, I suddenly froze. He was aroused. I was breathless but now for another reason entirely.

He seemed to grasp the fact I'd realized he was hard, and he stilled as well. He closed his eyes, and I physically felt him shudder. He seemed to have a silent war within, and I felt the moment he began to pull away. Other than our brief hot moment in the shower, all his touches and affection had bordered on brotherly.

I quickly looped my legs around his hips. "No, don't leave." I was still breathless from laughter.

He groaned, and with one hand bracing himself above me on the bed, he took his other and ran it through his abnormally tousled locks. "Don't make this hard on me, Peyton. Just a few more weeks

and I can be free to show you how much I want you without feeling like I'm crossing a line."

"I think we already crossed that line." I frowned.

I didn't want to push him out of his comfort zone, but I needed to move past this invisible barrier that had been erected between us. In so many ways we were closer, but it still wasn't enough for me. I didn't want my other relationships to feel like they were progressing while ours was at a standstill in a constant state of pause.

"I know," he self-deprecatingly muttered as he dipped his head in the crook of my neck and shoulders.

I knew I shouldn't tempt him further, but I couldn't help but grind myself against him. He groaned, and I nearly smiled when he succumbed and began to brush featherlight kisses across my collar bone. I released my hands from his loose grip and delved my fingertips in his sandy-blond hair.

He continued to kiss me up to my jawline until he captured my lips with his. His kiss was sensual and thorough, just like him. I opened my mouth to his probing tongue and moaned at how erotic his movements were. His fingers skimmed under my shirt, and I quivered at the contact.

After several moments of making out, I started getting impatient and began to run my hands against his smooth, hard body. I smiled against his lips when I realized he must shave his chest, because I felt a slight stubble against my fingertips. I knew some guys that lifted as much as he did participated in that grooming routine.

"You shave?" I inquired somewhat breathlessly as he pulled away to look down at me.

His mouth quirked. "I do. Mom was half Italian. I seemed to have inherited that hairy side of her family. I hated how it felt when I worked out, so I started shaving it."

I smiled and pulled him down for another kiss before I reached out to stroke him. I heard his breath catch before he pulled away from me.

"Nuh-uh, not tonight. It's a school night, and I don't want to be rushed when we finally consummate our relationship," he said with a gasping groan.

I pouted but understood his reasoning. I kind of wanted to savor our first time together too. I was horny as hell, but I could wait a little longer for him. I was content enough to increase our intimacy in other ways.

I hopped up to use the bathroom. I gave Lochlann a mock disgruntled look, but then paused in the doorway.

“Can we still make out until I get tired?” I compromised.

He shook his head and smiled, eye-crinkles and all. “Yeah, we can do that. Want me to turn on a movie first?”

I nodded. I realized early on that the quiet of the night was too unnerving for me. When I slept with Crew one night, his need to have his music and the fan on helped keep my nightmares at bay; that was until I fell into a deep sleep.

In the beginning, I would startle awake a lot before I could even fall completely asleep. The others must have been talking, and Crew must have related his experience with me because, later, all of them would put on some background noise so I could find sleep.

I did my business in the adjoining bathroom before washing my hands and came back out to the bedroom. Lochlann had just finished turning off the lights, and the Roku screen was up when I slipped back into the room. I climbed into bed with him and gave him an impish smile.

“Ready to make out now,” I chirped.

Lochlann gave me a sexy smirk before sliding back into bed with me. My patience was definitely tested as I tried to push him for more than just kisses and light petting despite my earlier mental resolve. Apparently, my body hadn’t gotten the memo.

●

It was funny, the things you didn’t consciously pick up at times. My mind liked to wander to the day Tormentor decided to put out a whole pack of cigarettes on my arm. Without a doubt, I knew I hated the smell of second-hand cigarette smoke. When my stepdad, Sean, had smoked in the house, the scent would cling to my clothing, hair, and numerous other places. Now the smell would always be associated with the sound of a lighter as it clicked into life.

My dreams were invaded by the click, click, click before distorted figures morphed above me. In the depths of my

nightmares, they had the ability to paralyze me, and it was the sound of my own terrified screams that woke me up.

Tonight, it was the combination of my screams and Lochlann's door nearly being kicked off the hinges that woke me up.

I noticed Lochlann was poised above me as the reverberation of the door bouncing off the walls continued, and then the light overhead was turned on. I blinked in confusion, and I felt the beginnings of a panic attack set in.

There was shouting and chaos all around me, exactly the opposite atmosphere I needed after I was woken from the nightmare I was just having. I was unable to fight my instincts as Lochlann reached for me. I lashed out without thought and screamed as I punched and kicked out at him.

It felt like I was having an out-of-body experience as Cooper came tearing across the room and tackled Lochlann to the floor. I watched in distorted disbelief as I watched Cooper try to punch Lochlann. I vaguely realized Kyler crouching down in front of me, as Zane and Crew removed Cooper off of Lochlann. It felt like Golden and Paxton's voice was underwater as I glanced over and looked at them. They had their hands up, trying to prevent Sal from coming into the room.

Kyler embraced me tightly. "Breathe kitten, breathe," I heard from a distance. "Feel my chest, hear my breath. Breathe with me, breathe.

I tried to claw my throat in a desperate attempt to let some air into my lungs. I shook my head as the blackness invaded my vision. I was in danger of passing out. I knew it, but I was too weak to prevent it.

"Breathe with me," Kyler insisted as he placed one of my hands against his chest over his beating heart and the other over his mouth.

I could feel the steady beat of his heart against my palm. The warmth of his breath caressed the other.

Kyler continued murmuring to me and I tried to imitate him. I watched the exaggerated motion of his lips. I felt the rise and fall of his chest against my own. Eventually, my surroundings came crashing back to me.

“You sick pig, what were you doing to her?” I heard Cooper snarl.

“It’s not what it looked like,” Crew growled.

“What kind of sick game are you guys playing?” Cooper yelled as spittle flew off his lips. “You know how vulnerable she is and you take advantage of her? I see how all of you touch her. And you,” he glared at Lochlann, “I thought you were above touching one of your students.”

“We aren’t taking advantage of her,” Paxton inserted vehemently. “We were all in a relationship with her before she was taken. And Lochlann isn’t her teacher. He’s not even her counselor.”

“Why was she screaming, then? And why was he half-naked on top of her, in his bed?” Cooper thundered.

Clay began to wail from his bedroom, and Golden stepped away from a now calm Sal to walk out of the bedroom.

I finally realized what was going on, and I jumped up to insert myself between Lochlann and Cooper. The look of devastation on Lochlann’s face tore my heart out. He looked ashamed.

“I have nightmares,” I insisted. “Lochlann and the other guys never took advantage of me. Especially Lochlann.”

I knew Cooper and Sal were well aware of my nightmares. However, they had never barged into one of our rooms. Typically, they knocked on the door and called out to us. Then one of the guys would have to reassure them that I had a nightmare. They never dared to kick down any of our doors!

“I wonder if the cops will agree when they arrive,” Cooper sneered. “And don’t think I won’t let your grandpa know when I call him in the morning.”

“Why would you call the cops?” I yelled. “I’m eighteen years old! I’m more than capable of making my own decisions with who I see. Other than platonically sleeping in the same bed as him to assist me with my night terrors, we haven’t been intimate at all! Not that it’s any of your business.”

My fear and panic attacks were quickly forgotten as I attempted to reassure them. I could see Lochlann wouldn’t utter a word in his defense. Even with the knowledge of the legal ramifications of our actions, the moral dilemma still weighed heavily on him.

“Do you really think David Delaney Sr. would allow her to live with us if he was concerned with her safety?” Kyler added, his jaw and fists clenched simultaneously. “He trusts us with her. Call the police back and cancel the call.”

“We can’t. There was a perimeter breach,” Sal explained calmly. “We have one of the night guards watching the perpetrators. One of them is claiming to be your mother's boyfriend. He claims he is here on her behalf. She would like to talk to you.”

I closed my eyes. A feeling of disbelief engulfed me, followed closely by suspicion. I hadn’t seen my mother for two months. As far as I knew, she never even bothered contacting me in all that time, either. It could be a ploy for someone to get close to me.

Fear and anger were battling within me.

“I have no mother,” I said with a deadpan expression.

I spent years watching her get abused and begged her to leave. She turned a blind eye when Sean started in on me. Then, mere weeks of us moving here, she decided to go without even a goodbye.

I had been missing for about three weeks and had been back for two. As far as I knew, never once did Priscilla, my mom, try to reach out to me or even join the efforts to look for me. She certainly had ways to contact me before today.

I knew some people would think I was too harsh on her, but they hadn’t gone through what I had. She decided to turn her back on me. Figuratively speaking, she had handed me the scissors to cut the strings of our relationship. Why shouldn’t I use them to cut her out of my life?

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“And you’re sure you have no clue who those men are?” the officer inquired as he pointed to the three men in the back of the squad cars.

The night air wasn’t the only thing that caused the shudder to ripple through my body. The three men weren’t poorly dressed or even terrible looking, but the look in their eyes made the alarm bells go off in my head. I couldn’t pinpoint what exactly caused the feeling of unease, but I didn’t like the feeling they gave me.

They had trouble written all over them. I didn't know why the men were here, who sent them, or even if they knew my mother. All I knew was I wanted nothing to do with them, and I definitely didn't want to hear a word out of their mouths.

As I took a deep breath and then out, the smokey wisp of my breath danced visibly in the frigid night air, the smell of fall heavy. The wind was tearing through the thin material of my hoodie. Zane seemed to sense my chill, because he came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me.

I shook my head and crossed my arms over my chest as I answered, "No. not a clue."

"Even if she did," Kyler argued to the officer, "why would they think *now* would be an appropriate time to pay her a visit? It's after midnight!"

"They are claiming Priscilla wanted to check on the welfare of her child," the cop said. "She alleges that all attempts at contacting her have failed. She's worried that Ms. Delaney is in an unsafe environment and sent her friends to ensure her safety. They claimed that they tried to come during *normal* hours but was turned away." He grimaced as if even he didn't believe the words he was speaking.

"I'm no longer a child, officer," I asserted as I gave Cooper a pointed look. "My mother left me with my… stepfather without a word. She didn't care about me then. I tried to contact her numerous times until, eventually, she disconnected her phone. She never called me then. Then I was abducted, and as far as I know, she never even tried to join in the search. I've been home for weeks now. Priscilla knows I still go to school, so why would she assume twelve-thirty in the morning would be an opportune time to finally reach out to me?"

"On that note, please charge them for trespassing and inform them in the future if Peyton's mom wants to communicate with her, there are better times and ways." Kyler sighed deeply. "We have two kids we're struggling to put back to bed, and we all have school or work in the morning. Not only is their approach unorthodox, but it's also highly suspicious."

"I would have to agree," the officer concurred. "I'll process them tonight, and I'll apprise Officer Pope of the new development.

He may or may not contact you tomorrow morning. If that's all, I'll leave you, folks, to return to bed."

"Thanks," I murmured my appreciation.

The FBI still seemed to have our case open but used Officer Pope as a point of contact. Apparently, he had worked tirelessly in my absence and had earned accolades and acknowledgment for it. It was well deserved, and I was pleased he was being recognized for it.

I could hear the men in the back of the squad car yelling at the officer as he opened his door. I refused to meet their glares. I didn't trust them. A shudder ran through my body, one that had nothing to do with the chill in the air, as my mind began to wonder if Priscilla really had sent them or if they knew Tormentor.

Fear began to clutch my chest once more, and I felt Zane pull me in close, almost painfully. It seemed to work, and I shut down my anxious dark thoughts. I would never get back to sleep if I wandered down the "what if" path. I needed my rest tonight.

I was determined to reclaim my life. There was no way in hell I was allowing Tormentor, Coach, and Principal Boyd to steal any more of it. I needed to continue endeavoring forward until, hopefully, their involvement in my life became a distant memory.

"Time to get back to bed," Zane insisted quietly.

As he guided me towards the house, I knew without a shadow of a doubt I wasn't returning to Lochlann's bedroom, especially after I saw Sal and Cooper having a whispered heated debate. I knew there was no convincing Cooper to go back to the apartment above the garage tonight. He was bound and determined to talk to Grandpa before he allowed me near the guys by myself.

Throughout the officer's visit, Cooper had maintained his frigid stance towards me. I could understand the concern if I had never explained our situation. However, he almost seemed controlling. If he didn't knock it off soon, I would ask him to be reassigned to the main house.

Grandpa had upped their security and had a lot more security on his staff. I didn't doubt that Cooper was good at his job, but he didn't seem to understand the boundaries I had set forth. I couldn't allow him to continue treating me like a child. I lost my childhood

innocence years ago. I was forced to grow up. I was more than capable of making my own decisions about my life, and he needed to understand and respect that.

He still seemed suspicious of me and my relationships. Quite frankly, I didn't appreciate how he continued to behave as if my kidnapping affected my way of thinking. Sal seemed to accept the truth and believe us when we told them that this was our life, that no one was taking advantage of me. Unfortunately, Cooper seemed unwilling and unable to recognize the truth.

What made me even more irritated was the fact that Lochlann had utterly shut down, and I almost physically felt the distance he was putting between us again. This push and pull between us was emotionally draining me. But try as I might, I couldn't let him go. I *wouldn't* let him go. I knew he wanted to be with me, and I wanted to be with him, but life seemed determined to keep us separated.

Right then, I had no fight left in me. There was nothing Sal and Cooper could say to us if Zane joined me in bed. Even if they tried, I had every confidence that Kyler would take care of them. He would be the voice Lochlann and I couldn't find.

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Flaws

I felt like my legs were made of lead, my eyes puffy with exhaustion, and I felt nauseous. The desire to go back to sleep and postpone my return to dance and school was highly tempting. If it wasn't for Zane and his decision to attend dance with me, I didn't think I would have been strong enough to go.

If I were honest with myself, I would admit it wasn't just my exhaustion that had my stomach in knots with nausea. The idea that I would be under intense scrutiny today wasn't helping my disposition any. Before my abduction, I had issues with people, namely family members that didn't appreciate my sudden appearance in their lives. I couldn't imagine their attitudes towards me had changed much.

Especially considering Leah and Catherine, my biological father's wife, and even some of my other family members never bothered reaching out to me in any way. Anya had brought me a gift basket and flowers from the school, from my team and instructors. I hadn't failed to notice that my cousin, Bailey, and her friends hadn't even bothered signing the card.

I was well aware that some of the people I would see or encounter today hadn't been my biggest fans. I dreaded the treatment I covertly—or overtly—might receive at their hands. I wasn't naïve to believe they'd leave me alone or, better yet, ignore me.

I knew the smartest thing for me to do was take my Grandpa's suggestion. He wanted me to finish out my senior year with a tutor and drop the dance team. I could still perform as an individual for networking purposes.

But I just couldn't allow my agitators the satisfaction of knowing they could have so much control over my life.

“Let’s go, beautiful,” Zane murmured. “You’re ready to return to your life. You have me. You have us,” he reassured me as if he understood my silent struggle.

It was an argument I had vacillated over several times in the last couple of weeks. It was a struggle I was sure to frequently experience until I felt like I had gained my life back.

I nodded, somewhat reassured by his reminder. “I know,” I murmured. “I’m just… second-guessing my decisions. Thank you for getting up early for practices this week.”

Zane informed me in the middle of last week that he had talked to his mother about early morning workouts. With the upcoming competition, we had to polish off our piece. We would practice the hour before school began. Then he would go to school while I attempted to learn the group number until I went to school myself.

Anya and I already discussed the slim likelihood of me having a solo. Before my abduction, I would have protested the decision, but I was realistic enough to recognize my duo and group number would be taxing enough on my recovering body. In the past, I had been known to push my body past the point of rationality. However, I also realized I had never been through the ordeal I had just experienced.

I would bide my time. It was competition season, and one missed competition wouldn’t be too detrimental to my dancing career. I gave it a week or two, certain that I would be able to perform a solo once more. It might not be as technical or complicated as my past pieces, but I was confident I could achieve an excellent performance.

I pulled my bags out of the closet, thankful I had packed them last night. I was an uncoordinated mess as I stumbled back out of the closet. I looked longingly at my unmade bed once more, and it took everything I had not to answer its tempting call.

I had slept for less than four hours last night. It had been a struggle shutting my brain down enough to seek sleep. Every little noise and thought had me jumping and paranoid. I hoped Officer Pope could confirm the relationship between our intruders and my mother. The alternative was too terrifying.

It had taken every trick in the book for Zane to get me to sleep. He turned on some music and then resorted to “tickles” until I fell asleep. Somehow he had discovered that if he ran his fingertips across my arms, neck, and back, it would relax me until I fell asleep. The feel of his barely-there caress caused my nerve ending to tingle and helped lull me to slumber.

His perceptiveness and ability to continually try to help me had been a godsend the last couple of weeks. I realized daily I was beyond blessed that he had the patience to help me try to get through this. With his help and the others, I was slowly getting stitched back together.

“Here, I got that.” Zane barely contained his yawn as he grabbed my bag and threw it over his shoulder. Now he had both of our duffel bags and book bags. I wanted to protest, but I knew it was useless. I was too tired even to attempt to.

“Thanks,” I tiredly mumbled as I shuffled up the steps.

We had returned to my bedroom on the guys’ insistence, so I was less likely to hear Clay and Maisie as they were calmed back to sleep early this morning. I was thankful when Paxton informed me that they were both sleeping about half an hour after we’d returned to bed. I felt guilty for not helping them, but I had to get up nearly two hours before they’d be up.

The smell of coffee tantalized my senses as my foot hit the top stair. It perked me up slightly as I went upstairs and into the kitchen. A small smile curved my lips as I saw Kyler standing in front of the espresso machine. He was a genius at making lattes.

Kyler was still the earliest riser in the house. Since my return, he had seemed to get up earlier to get his workday over sooner. Kyler almost always made it home before dinner. He had returned to work last week on my insistence. With winter coming, there were no guarantees that he would be busy in his construction company or find decent enough houses to flip.

I took a moment just to admire him in this domestic moment. His simple white t-shirt and dark well-worn jeans got me every time. I didn’t care how often I saw him in the simple garments. The way his clothes clung to his large muscular frame was a huge turn-on. His work ethic and calloused hands were an added bonus.

“Good morning, kitten,” he crooned as he turned with a knowing smirk.

“Morning,” I rasped, both with a morning voice and because my voice hadn’t returned yet.

The doctors were unsure if my voice would ever return to its regular cadence. They were uncertain if it was due to my prolonged sickness without proper treatment or the constant shock to my vocal cords from the dog collar I had been forced to wear.

Like my scars, it would be a daily reminder of what I had been through. I couldn’t wait for the day my blemishes transformed into battle wounds. Instead of a grim reminder, I hoped they would be a positive souvenir that I was a survivor.

“Cheddar jalapeno bagels with cream cheese and ham.” Kyler kissed me on the corner of my mouth as he slid two bagels towards me and Zane. “I know you don’t have time to sit and eat, but I figured they would be easy to eat on the go.”

Typically, I wouldn’t have eaten anything this heavy before dance, but I needed the extra calories and the carbs. The fresh bagels had also become a craving slash weakness of mine. Twice a week, Kyler went to the next town over to oversee one of his new flips. He had stumbled upon a bagel shop that sold homemade bagels in over twenty different flavors and over fifteen varieties of flavored cream cheese.

Since he found out my fondness for them, he made sure to have them in the pantry at all times. I hadn’t failed to notice his pit stop at the closed shop last night on the way home.

He had made friends with the older owners, who had taken a liking to him. Whether it was due to his obscure notoriety−all my guys had been featured on the news, one way or another−or just general rapport, they had given him their personal phone numbers. They insisted Kyler use it. They had been closed and still managed to make over two dozen bagels for us.

If I had been braver, I would have met them face-to-face and complimented them on their delicious food. I would have also thanked the shop owners for being so generous with their time. Their customer service had been beyond amazing and accommodating.

“Thanks,” I murmured as I accepted my bagel and thermos from him. I stood on my tiptoes to return the kiss to his cheek.

“Yeah, thanks, man.” Zane smiled as he took an abnormally large bite from his bagel.

It was Zane who had convinced me to add the honey ham to my jalapeno cheddar bagel with cream cheese last week, and it had moved to the top of my list of favorites.

Zane proceeded to slice another bagel open. It was a sweet concoction that reminded me of cinnamon toast crunch. I knew without asking him that it was for his mother. She had quickly become addicted to them with the addition of maple brown sugar cream cheese. It was way too sweet for me, but I could understand why people inhaled them as well.

“No problem.” Kyler smiled as he reached into the refrigerator and pulled out a canvas bag. “I packed some snacks. Some healthy, some not so much.” He gave me a pointed look.

Between him and Paxton, I think they were continually shoving food at me. It was just another way they showed me how invested they were in my recovery.

“Thanks, baby,” I murmured, kissing him once more.

Kyler gave me a satisfied smirk. “Good luck, kitten. If at any time during the day you need to take a time out, let me know.”

We already had this discussion last night. Golden, Zane, and Kyler seemed to support my decision to return to my “normal” life. Paxton had tried to implore me− on numerous occasions− that I take Grandpa’s suggestions. Lochlann seemed to have accepted the Switzerland approach and had remained neutral. Crew, on the other hand, seemed to be straddling the fence. One moment he seemed to support my decision, and the next, he seemed to want to shade and protect me longer.

“I will,” I reassured him. I blew out a breath. “I have to return to reality eventually.”

I had to fight the butterflies that threatened to take flight in my stomach once more.

“We’ll be with her all day,” Zane reassured him.

“Me too,” Sal gruffed from the doorway.

I startled for a moment. Then I tensed. I sought Cooper out. I really didn't want to face him this morning. However, I had every intention of talking to Grandpa before the little rat… well, ratted me out.

I had never had a conversation with Grandpa about the guys. I knew he wasn't stupid. I was sure he suspected that we were more than friends. I just wasn't sure how he would react to knowing I was also involved with Lochlann. I didn't know if he thought it was inappropriate for a school counselor to be involved with a student, even if he wasn't a teacher *or* my counselor.

"We agreed that he would take the day off," Sal said as if he understood I was looking for Cooper.

"He needs it," Kyler stated bluntly. "There are bagels in here, man. You have just enough time to make one before being late."

"Thanks." Sal grinned before he made quick work of picking out a spinach bagel.

"I'm taking our bags out to the SUV." Zane kissed my temple before turning to leave.

I turned to Kyler and waved my fingers towards him. "Have a great day at work."

"Have a great day at dance and school," Kyler murmured in return before he pulled me in to place a soft, sweet kiss on my lips.

I was all too aware of Sal's presence and was bummed. I couldn't deepen our kiss and adequately say goodbye to Kyler.

Kyler chuckled as if he could read my mind before he nipped at my lower lip, then soothed it with a tongue swipe.

"It's you and me tomorrow night," he whispered in my ear.

I pulled back and looked at him. There was a light in his eyes, the potential of carnal delights. I barely contained the shudder of excitement, understanding the silent promise. I was now counting down the hours until I could share a bed with him once more.

●

I was happy that the locker room was empty when I got to the studio. We'd purposefully arrived forty-five minutes early, and Zane used his key to let us in. I knew this, too, was carefully planned by the guys. It gave me some time to get ready and warm up before being overwhelmed by all the other girls.

Only the older elite team dance squad came at the unseemly hour of six a.m to practice. That gave Starr, Anya, and Alex time to provide at least one hour of undivided attention, as the minis, juniors, and teens came in at eight, nine, and ten o'clock, respectively.

Typically, the first hour of our training consisted of warming up and self-practice. The second hour was when groups practiced together, sometimes for a couple of hours. For some, this was almost like a full-time job. Many of the girls and guys on the elite teams had tutors so they could spend most of the time at the studio.

As much as I loved the competition team, and that dancing for a living was my ultimate dream, I wanted some semblance of a normal life. I actually enjoyed school and liked the majority of my teachers. Plus, it was a bonus that I got to spend time with the guys.

Some people might have thought I was crazy for being with them nearly twenty-four-seven, but I loved being around them. Without them by my side these last few weeks, my mental state would have been a lot worse.

A gentle knock on the door brought me out of my musings. "You ready, beautiful?"

"In a minute," I called out to Zane, knowing it was him.

I did a quick once over and grimaced. I had ordered new dance gear. It was hard finding cute clothing that covered my neck and arms. For today, I had picked out a white three-quarter sleeved cropped mock turtleneck. I paired it with a pair of black boy-cut dance shorts. My hair was in a messy bun.

I turned my head from side to side and noticed after some movements that the mock turtleneck didn't adequately cover my neck's abrasions. I rifled through my bag and withdrew a wide cloth headband. I pulled it on over my head and was pleased to see it covered my imperfections entirely.

At least some of my flaws were easier to hide than others.

"You are beautiful with or without those scars," Zane softly whispered behind me from the doorway.

I jumped and gasped. My hand was poised over my throat as my heart raced a million miles a minute. I willed it to slow down.

"Not everyone will think so," I whispered with a slight crack in my voice. "I'm going to be stared at and talked about enough today

without giving them more gossip to discuss."

I grabbed my duffle bag and stuffed it in my locker.

Zane walked over to me and held my hand. "I wish there was something I could say or do to make it all go away."

"You can't," I said ruefully. "But it's enough that you're here for me."

He gave me a pensive nod before he led me towards one of the practice rooms.

●

Lovely by Billie Eilish and Khalid poured from the speakers as I ran towards Zane. His arms were poised and ready for me. I leaped up, then waited to feel his arms on my waist before I twisted around. My back braced against his biceps, my body cradled to his chest. He dipped slightly before pushing me up, giving me the momentum to continue to turn in his arms.

We had to time this Cheshire Cat lift perfectly. He had to synchronize my landing while he continued in motion, lifting me into the air. I had to place a lot of trust in him as he tossed me into the air. I then turned my body in a near one-eighty, so I was now facing him. The moment my hands landed on his broad shoulders, I knew I had screwed up.

I overshot it. My ab muscles were quivering with strain, and I felt myself overcompensating for my weakness. I tried to recover and open my legs into a full split, but I knew I wasn't completing the move. My eyes widened, and I yelped when I felt myself begin to collapse.

"I got you," Zane encouraged me. "Trust me."

It wasn't him that I couldn't trust. It was myself. Zane wasn't even straining or breathless as he took a few steps to catch me before I fell.

I let out a loud expletive as he gently lowered me to the ground.

"Dammit!" I stomped my feet like a petulant two-year-old before I walked over to my water bottle. I took a few gulps of water, panting as I pulled it away. "Damn them!" I screamed once more.

I never lost my cool when I was dancing. I was emotional and expressive, but I never let anger or frustration take over, until today. It was clear after just half an hour of practice that I was weak.

Yes, I knew that lift was one of the most technical moves to do for an expert, seasoned dancer, but we had nailed it a time or two before I was taken. It hadn't been easy, but it had never left me this winded and shaky.

If Zane weren't my partner, I would have eaten the ground several times this morning. It was clear I had lost a lot more of my stamina and technique than I assumed I had.

"You'll get it. We'll get it," Zane softly encouraged me as he picked up my towel and gently blotted my sweat-sheened skin. "Let's try it again."

We had run through our number several times, and there was no doubt we needed to continue brushing up on all the hard edges—correction; *I* had to tighten up. There was no doubt it was Zane who was more at ease, graceful, and flawless in our number. I couldn't remember the last time I was this inadequate in dance. Never mind. Scratch that. I knew when: never.

I prided myself on the ability to pick up things quickly. Sure, I had to work hard on past dance techniques, but doubt had never plagued me. My body hadn't failed me.

"Nyet," Anya's Russian- accented voice stated from the door, "Peyton is tired."

I jumped slightly. "I've been tired before." I sighed as I looked over at Anya. "I can work through it."

"You have five more hours of practice before you go to school, yes?" Anya raised a finely arched brow.

She was a tiny slip of a woman, and I had about five inches on her, easily, but she still demanded my respect with just a single glance.

I nodded before I took another sip of water. "Yes, ma'am," I answered her, chagrined.

"Don't push too hard." She gave me a stern look. "You still need to learn our group dance. Go to the coffee shop, take a break, eat something, and bring me back a coffee."

I wanted to protest and request one more run-through, but I could tell resistance would be futile. I didn't want to be treated like an invalid. Madam Galiana, my previous instructor, would push us past the point of exhaustion. I remember plenty of times that my literal

blood, sweat, and tears had been shed in her studio, and she still pushed us for more.

“Come on, Peyton,” Zane quietly bade me.

I nodded reluctantly. “I have to put on some sweats.”

Zane threw a casual arm around my shoulders as he guided me towards the locker rooms. Inwardly I was screaming at my situation. I wanted to compete this weekend with Zane, but if our dance wasn’t ready, we couldn’t.

Zane left me at the locker room door. “I’m going to grab a hoodie. I’ll be right back.” He kissed the tip of my nose.

“Okay.” Sighing, I continued to sulk as I entered the room.

I heard the chatter cease entirely and I froze. I had completely forgotten that the other girls would be here by now and getting dressed. I pretended they weren’t there as I made my way to my locker.

Kayley was the first to break the silence as she came skipping over to me. “Hey, Peyton. Wait until you see our group number! It’s really cool.”

Kayley was one of my cousins, one of my new family members who had never acted hostile. Renee had informed me that Anya had moved Kayley up to the senior elite team in my absence. Apparently, there was trouble in her sister Bailey’s paradise once more. Kayley had been given a solo in the last competition− over her sister− and it appeared as if she was taking the lead in our group number at our next competition.

That had infuriated Bailey. Bailey was technically flawless, but she had horrible timing. It took her several practices to even be in step with the rest of us. Kayley, on the other hand, was technically impressive and picked up new dances rather quickly.

“I told her we’re doing a number on loving an addict.” Renee smiled at me as she came over to us.

“I can’t wait to learn it.” I tried to act enthusiastic.

Truthfully, I was still brooding over the fact that Anya forced me to take a break. She might not have been the slave driver Madam Galiana was, but she always pushed us. Her unwillingness to let me run through the number until I was confident in it made me

believe she doubted my ability to “bounce” back. I didn’t need any more doubters.

I was my own worst critic. I needed the ones who loved and cared for me to be my cheering section, so to speak. If she began to doubt me, then my self-confidence was sure to tank.

I pulled a pair of Golden’s sweats out of my duffel bag and pulled them on. I contemplated putting on an undershirt but quickly nixed that idea when I realized all eyes were still on me. I had no desire to be under their scrutiny longer than I had to be.

“Where are you going? Practice is getting ready to start,” Bailey demanded as she eyed my sweatpants.

I’m sure she recognized them. After all, she had dated Golden for a long time, and the sweats were clearly from our school's track team. She had broken up with Gloden when she assumed she could finally convince Zane to date her.

“Not that it’s any of your business,” I scoffed, “but I got here almost an hour ago. I’m taking a break.”

She didn’t need to know I was forced to take a break. She also didn’t need to know I probably needed it. It was just hard to admit that to myself at the moment.

“Must be nice to make your own hours,” Bailey scorned. “None of us would have been able to take as much time off as you and still have a place on the team.”

“Oh, shut up,” Kayley jeered as she rolled her eyes. “You act like she had a choice.”

Even though they were sisters, there was no love lost between them, mostly after Bailey had hung Kayley out to dry at a party about a month ago. Until recently, Bailey, Kayley, and their younger sister lived with their mother, Diane Delaney. Kayley was fed up with the toxic environment in her mother’s house, so she was currently living with her father.

“Stay out of this, Kale,” Bailey nearly snarled. “You only got moved to *my* team because of her absence.”

Well, this was lovely. Less than five minutes after seeing people out of my immediate circle, and we were already talking about my abduction. I was really hoping for a longer reprieve.

“I didn’t have a choice last year either,” added Wendy, one of Bailey’s besties. “I was sick and missed two practices. I was kicked off the competition team for the rest of the year.”

“You got gonorrhea and didn’t get it treated on time,” Jane, one of my teammates, deadpanned.

Wendy paled and shook her head. “That’s… that’s a lie.”

Bailey looked as shocked by the news as everyone else in the room. I heard a few girls laugh at her expense. I felt bad for her for a split second, but then remembered she had brought it on herself.

“No, it’s not,” Leanne butted in as she closed her locker door and locked it. “You forgot that you gave it to my cousin.”

“As if she would ever sleep with your cousin,” Bailey insisted.

“Like you haven’t wanted to,” Leanne returned with a snap.

Starr came into the room. She looked at all of us before turning to give me a cautious hug. “So good to have you back, dear,” she murmured.

“Thanks.” I feigned a smile.

“Why is she allowed back on the team?” Bailey demanded. “I thought if we missed two classes, we were kicked off.”

“Well, my dear,” Anya said with a stern voice from behind us. “When you own a school, you can make the rules, and this is my school. Also, I'm not too fond of tardiness, and yet you’re late for your class. Again. Maybe you should worry about yourself and not others.”

I hadn’t even seen Anya come into the back entrance of the locker room. It was clear by her pinched features and crossed arms that she wasn’t pleased with what she’d overheard.

Bailey narrowed her eyes on Anya, clearly itching for a confrontation. She wasn’t foolish enough to argue, though. Instead, she made a sound of frustration before storming out of the locker room, her posse close on her heels.

“I would like a pumpkin spice latte,” Anya said, effectively shooing me out the door too.

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Ultimatums

The moment I stepped into the coffee shop and got a whiff of their fresh coffee cakes and brewing coffee, I wasn't as bitter as I had been ten minutes ago. I realized that I was hungry, even though I had eaten a whole bagel a little over an hour ago.

"I'll go get our orders," Zane said. "Do you want anything in particular?"

"Caramel hazelnut latte with a coffee cake," I responded quietly, then turned to Sal. "You have to try their coffee cakes."

I was beyond thankful that the shop was busy. No one seemed to notice my arrival. I knew I had to look relatively suspicious. The sun was just coming up, and I was wearing my hood up over my copper tresses and large oversized glasses. I had determined I was going incognito when I went into public.

Well, as incognito as I could with a six-foot-five bodyguard and a sexy Greek god accompanying me.

"I can order for us all if you want to find a seat," Zane offered to Sal.

"Can I get a breakfast sandwich, a coffee cake, and a white chocolate mocha?" Sal said, handing Zane his card. "I'll cover it today."

I opened my mouth to protest, but Zane smirked before taking it and walking off. Sal led me to a back corner table and took the seat facing the door. I slid into the bench across from him and began to fiddle with the salt and pepper shakers.

"How long have you been in private security?" I asked to break the silence.

"Five years." Sals smiled slightly.

"Why the change?"

I knew he had been in secret service once upon a time, but that was it.

He shrugged one broad shoulder. “I did four years in the military before I became a part of the secret service. It was hard to have a family life, and in some cases, the money is better in the private sector.”

“Do you have a family?” I asked in surprise.

He had been with me for over a week now and had never left the property. Did he video chat with them?

“Three kids. Two boys and a girl. They’re thirteen, twelve, and five.” He grinned before he showed me a picture on his phone of three beautiful children.

“They’re cute.” I smiled. “Do you get to see them often? Especially now that you’re stuck with me.”

“They live with their mom.” He grimaced. “She begged me to find a career where I’d be home more often, but then she realized she really didn’t like me home that much. We tried.” He shrugged casually, but I could see it hadn’t been an amicable separation. “It just didn’t work for us. Our court order allows me to have every other weekend with them and one night a week.”

I was sure there was a lot more to the story, but I didn’t want to open up any fresh wounds. I could see he loved them. Most loving fathers wouldn’t create not one, not two, but three children only to be relegated to twenty-five percent of their lives. If there was no abuse, I couldn’t understand how any court could designate eight days a month out of a thirty to a parent.

“Will you get to see them this weekend?” I asked with a frown.

His frown mirrored my own. “I can’t.”

“Why not? Do they live too far away?” I inquired as I began to pick at the edges of a napkin.

He shook his head. “They live about twenty miles north of here, but I have a job. I’ve been trying to take jobs that aren’t as time-consuming, but this job can set me up to have a lot more time to see them.”

“This job can be flexible,” I insisted. “Grandpa already said you guys should take off a couple of days. If you want, I’m sure Loch, Golden, and Paxton wouldn’t mind if you brought them to the house if need be.”

“Brought who back?” Zane asked before placing our tray of food down on the table.

“It’s Sal’s weekend with his kids, and he might not see them because of me,” I explained. “What night are you supposed to see them?” I added as an afterthought.

“Thursday,” Sal said. “But I already contacted their mom.” The way he grimaced, I was sure it hadn’t been a pleasant conversation.

I wondered how many days he had to miss seeing his children due to his career.

“Maisie would probably love the company,” Zane added as he handed Sal back his card. “They have that monstrosity of a playground out back, and we can rent some movies. They can watch them in the theater room. I’ll text the guys now.”

Sal held up his hand with a chuckle. “I’ll think about it,” he said before opening up his breakfast sandwich. “I wouldn’t leave Coop by himself that long.”

I snorted. “Yeah, because two people babysitting me twenty-four-seven is necessary when another company guards the grounds. It’s slightly overkill.”

Sal chuckled but shook his head.

We ate in silence for some time before I saw Sal stiffen. “Mr. Delaney.” He cleared his throat after swallowing the food he had in his mouth and stood.

I turned. I nearly groaned aloud when I realized it was Grandpa. I guessed that little rat had spoken to him already.

“Sit, sit, finish your breakfast,” Grandpa insisted.

Sal took his seat and seemed to sit straighter, clearly intimidated by my grandfather even though he had at least two or three inches on him and about fifty pounds.

“Grandpa.” I nodded at him, noticing the stroller he was pushing. His assistant and close friend, Henry, stood behind him. “It’s a bit early for you, isn’t it?”

I hoped Grandpa was just here to say hi and not discuss things I wasn’t ready to.

He gave me a rueful smile before he pushed a stroller closer. “I forgot what sleepless nights felt like with little ones in the house.

These two are early risers. They were up, so I thought it would be nice to get out for a little bit."

Henry chuckled and shook his head. "Don't pretend you don't enjoy every second of it."

I gaped when I recognized my youngest cousins Raphael and Honor strapped into it. They were Aunt Ava's youngest children. My mind froze for a second.

I had once been protective over all the children, but now that I wasn't in that cabin in the woods any longer, I found it challenging to look at them. Ralphy, although a little cutey, looked a lot like Coach, and Honor was the spitting image of Tormentor, with her silky black hair and bright blue eyes.

I felt Zane grab my thigh, and I jumped at the unexpected touch. It seemed to shake me out of my daze.

"I thought you had nannies for that," I croaked out finally.

"You know your Grandpa." Henry chuckled.

I slowly nodded.

I knew Grandpa was enamored with his new grandchildren. Even the ones that weren't biologically his. Now that he was semi-retired, he was able to enjoy them in a way he hadn't been able to with his own children. Yes, he'd hired nannies, but in truth, he was with them as much as the help was.

"Three of them," Grandpa said wearily. "Unfortunately, I have to fire two of them. The youngest one took pictures of the kids and posted them on her social media after I asked her not to several times *and* after she signed a contract. The other young one finds it more important to flirt with the guards than actually to do her job." He turned to Henry then. "You can go ahead and get your shopping done. I'll be here for a bit."

Henry nodded. "Call me if you need me sooner. See you later, Salvatore, Peyton, and Zane." He smiled and waved before leaving.

"See you later," we chorused in return.

"Well, I may have someone in mind for a nanny," Sal volunteered in the silence that followed. "My younger sister is getting ready to lose her clients." At Grandpa's skeptical look, he chuckled, explaining, "She was the nanny to the previous Vice President's nieces, and she's currently watching an ambassador's children. Her

charges—six of them, by the way—are returning to their country. She understands discretion and will have references. I'm not even sure you'll need to hire two more nannies if you choose to keep only the one."

Grandpa nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Give her my number, and maybe I'll do a video interview with her."

I chuckled but quickly covered my mouth. My grandpa was just learning how to operate a cell phone. How did he know how to video chat?

"I'm learning," Grandpa grumbled at me as if he understood my mirth. "Now." He turned to me with a severe expression. "What happened last night? I heard a few of your mom's friends came to visit."

It didn't surprise me that he was already aware of the situation last night and had already gotten to the bottom of their "visit."

"*Are* they Priscilla's friends?" I inquired, refusing to call her *Mom*.

"They are." He nodded. "It was confirmed this morning," he said evasively.

I felt tension within unravel into relief. I hadn't even realized it had been sitting heavily on my chest. The alternative to the trespasser's presence had been overwhelming. I much rather it had been a few of Priscilla's low-life friends than Tormentor coming after me.

Zane put a reassuring arm around my shoulder, and I leaned into him. I'm sure he could feel the tiny tremors wracking my body.

"Some?" Raphael demanded, pointing to my coffee cake.

I broke him off a small piece and held it out to him. "Say 'thank you,'" I automatically said as I would Clay and Maisie.

"Tanks," he chirped before holding out another pudgy hand.

I broke him off another piece and handed it to him.

"Did Priscilla attempt to contact you about me while I was gone? Why does she suddenly want to talk to me?" I asked Grandpa with scorn towards her.

"She tried to come by a few days ago. It was the first time she attempted to reach you, as far as I know. One of the security guys found her on your property," Grandpa said with a slight scowl. "By

the time I got down there, she was gone. I don't know why she wants to talk to you."

It seemed highly suspicious to me. My curiosity was heightened, but at the same time, there was a part of me that didn't care. What mother ditched her daughter with an abuser and then never searched for her when she was missing?

I'll tell you what kind. The kind that I didn't need in my life.

"Even if she thought it was important to see me after all this time, she could have picked a better time to do so," I scoffed. "I don't want to see her."

"That's your decision," Grandpa agreed with me.

"More." Raphael held out both hands.

"Please," I urged him.

"*Pease*," he mimicked.

I broke off another piece for him. It wasn't like I was going to eat it. My appetite had vanished once more. Instead, I took a sip of my latte.

"I'll get the little tyke his own," Sal volunteered. "If that's okay?" He looked over at grandpa. "Would you like anything as well, Mr. Delaney?"

I forgot Sal was there, but I didn't mind talking about Priscilla in front of him. I liked him, and if there were a chance she'd attempt to see me again, he would know my wishes as well.

Grandpa shook his head fondly with a chuckle. "He already ate, but these children… they seem to eat constantly. Yes, please do grab him one, and can you get me a large black coffee and maybe a whole crumb cake to go?" He handed Sal a wad of cash before taking his empty seat.

I knew he was probably taking the cake home to the other children. I always thought it was odd how they seemed to be on a diet of sorts. Coach had been the only one I'd witnessed giving them sweets.

Unbidden, my mind began to wander more in-depth into the darker recesses of my mind. They were horrible men. What they did to Claire and me was abhorrent. Yet I couldn't deny the glimpses of… good in them. How could such evil men have any good in them?

I had seen how Tormentor and Coach Carson had loved the children in their own way. I had seen Tormentor cradle Honor and nurture her, had seen how the children loved the playful side Coach had towards them. My mind still couldn't wrap around a portion of what I had witnessed and had been put through.

"Beautiful?" Zane murmured in my ear before grasping my hands tightly in his.

I blinked rapidly, reality crashing back all at once.

I was in a coffee shop.

I wasn't there anymore.

I. Was. Not. There.

I drew a ragged breath in and realized I must have been holding my breath. Grandpa looked concerned, but Zane gently caressed my hands.

"Have you heard anything about Tor− Pearce?" I blurted out. "It's evident that he had a relationship with Ava, so why can't they prove he was there? Why isn't he behind bars?"

Tormentor was still running free and his silence worried me. I fully expected him to seek retribution. He didn't seem like a man to forgive and forget. I had essentially taken his kids away from him and I was sure he wasn't happy about it.

Grandpa looked at me with concern, and I could tell the subject was sore for him as well. "The FBI doesn't have enough evidence to prove his involvement. With Coach Carson, Ava, and Claire insisting he wasn't there, there's little they can do." He leaned over and clasped my hands in his. "I told you I hired a private investigator. If the FBI isn't willing to investigate further, than we will," he reassured me. "It will only be a matter of time before he slips up."

I leaned back and tilted my head to the ceiling, attempting to control my turbulent emotions. Nodding, I blew out a loud breath of frustration and rage. Why was finding justice so slow sometimes? I knew I would never sleep easy knowing he was still out there.

"Have you followed up on any of the therapists?" Grandpa inquired, clearly realizing my battle within.

I shook my head. I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want to bare my soul to a stranger, forced to talk about things I'd rather forget.

Grandpa sighed. “Claire’s therapist has been an amazing help,” he barely spoke above a whisper. “It’s great that you have people that love you surrounding you, but you may need more.”

“The Principal thinks I should talk to Mrs. White,” I admitted quietly.

“Would you like me to talk to him and ask him if Lochlann will suffice?” he inquired with a raised brow.

I tensed, knowing he knew. The proverbial cat was out of the bag. I think he’d always had his suspicions about me and Lochlann. It was never confirmed, though. He didn’t ask, and I didn’t tell.

I shook my head resolutely at his question. Was it weird that I didn’t want to talk to the one person that had been trained to help people like me? Admittedly, I didn’t want to talk to any of them about what happened. After my first initial word vomit, I had been too afraid to analyze their emotions. I was too insecure, wondering if they only stayed with me because I was broken.

I had experienced more than most eighteen-year-olds I knew. I had lived with a man determined to break me. I always said I was bent, not broken. But what if Tormentor, Coach, and Principal Boyd did what Sean was never able to do? What if they *had* broken me?

“Sometimes it’s hard to talk to the ones closest to us,” Grandpa cleared his throat, “and he is very close, isn’t he?”

I knew there was no avoiding this conversation now. I had to suck it up and fight for my guys.

“I’m eighteen,” I huffed before handing Ralphy another piece of my cake. “He’s only five years older than me, and technically we haven’t done anything.”

Grandpa sighed heavily. “And the others?”

Guess we were *finally having this conversation*, I thought.

Grandpa had witnessed how affectionate they were towards me. He saw how they cared for me and took care of me. I was sure he’s been well aware of the situation the whole time. He just needed or wanted confirmation.

I looked down at the floor, hoping that it would just open up and swallow me whole.

My mother never had the “talk” with me. The most Sean ever said to me in regards to dating guys was ‘don’t ever come home

pregnant or I'd wish I was dead,' after he took me to a clinic, of course.

"We're all with her," Zane said quietly.

Grandpa didn't look shocked by the statement. He just nodded as if it had confirmed his suspicions all along. Grandpa wasn't a dense man. He had to have seen how the guys were around me.

"The school board will fire Lochlann regardless of your age." Grandpa sighed. "Maybe you should reconsider moving back into your house. I'll increase the security, and the guys can come and visit."

"No." I shook my head resolutely. "We've been discreet, and we haven't done anything. The Isaacs' house is the only one that can accommodate us all."

"Do you want him to get fired?" Grandpa argued. "You do realize he would never be able to work with children again if he were to be fired from his job under those conditions. At least with Kyler and your age difference, he has nothing to do with students."

I opened my mouth to argue, and he held up a hand.

"I couldn't care less about the age difference or that you're seeing them all. All I care about is if you're happy and if they treat you right. I'm just saying most of society will never accept it or understand it. When Lochlann took his position at the school, he understood he could never get involved with a student, even though you both are two consenting adults."

I felt my irritation and ire deflate. "What do I do?" I sighed as I leaned into Zane some more.

Grandpa linked his fingers together. "I think you need to think about Lochlann's future, should anyone find out about you two. There won't be temporary repercussions. It could be long-term negative consequences."

I nodded, feeling bad. I didn't want Lochlann to lose his career and any future job opportunities because of our relationship. I also knew I didn't want to let him go, either. I had a lot to consider. I couldn't be selfish.

"Can you find Cooper a position in your house?" I finally broke the silence. "He won't ever respect me, and I don't want him

watching over me if he's constantly gossiping about me or belittling me. I don't particularly appreciate feeling like a child. I was forced to grow up fast, and he'll always fail to see that. I don't want him *fired*," I added as an afterthought. "I just don't want him working for me."

Grandpa winced slightly at the reminder of my past. He still seemed remorseful for the treatment I received from his youngest son's hands. I didn't blame him any longer. I knew he had no knowledge of the monster my step-dad/ uncle was.

"He was the one who informed you of Lochlann and me, right?" I asked, and he gave me a tempered nod. "I can't ever trust him. I don't want to keep secrets from you, and honestly, I didn't think it was anyone's business what I did or who I was with. He should have given me the courtesy to talk to you first. My safety and what happened last night should have been relayed to you. My possible relationships should not have been. You pay him to watch over me, not criticize me with his judgment."

Grandpa nodded in understanding. "I'll move Cooper to the big house. I'll have someone new take you to school today. Every day this week, you'll have a new man or woman from my security detail accompany you everywhere. By Friday you can choose who you feel the most comfortable with. Will that suit you?"

I smiled at his ability to understand me and care about my thoughts and feelings. "That would be awesome, thanks, Grandpa. And also," I added as Sal made his way back towards us. "Sal needs to be with his family too. He is supposed to get his children this week, and he's too stubborn to ask."

"Email Henry the days, and we'll make sure Sal's covered when he needs to see them or get them," Grandpa said without skipping a beat.

In a rare show of affection, I got up and hugged Grandpa. "Thank you. I love you," I murmured.

I might've been too chicken shit to tell the guys I loved them, but I knew how precarious life could be. I never wanted my grandfather to doubt how much I loved him. I wanted him to know how much he had changed my life and my views about family since meeting him.

He had been there for me more than my mother or the man who raised me, or even the one who was actually my biological father. He supported me and how I wanted to live my life. He continued to help those who had meant something to me. He didn't have to, yet he did.

His eyes were bright with unshed tears as he hugged me tightly. "I love you, too, Peyton," he said with a broken voice.

I leaned my head on his shoulder and let him hold me a little longer.

9

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New Shadow

The human body could be so fickle.

No matter how much my mind wanted my body to cooperate today, it wouldn't. I was able to get the steps of the dance down, but my turns weren't as tight as they usually were, and my body was shaking with fatigue.

"Don't let go!" Starr clapped to the beat of the music.

Leave a Light On by Cooper Lee was vibrating through the speakers. Alex was positioned in the front of the room showing us the moves as Starr yelled out instructions. Alex was no longer a dancer, and her knees were shot after several years of dancing, but she still could emulate the movements enough for us to pick up on them. If she didn't perform the move, Starr would yell it out.

"Bailey," Kayley hissed as her sister leaned too far into her.

Starr had us all in line with our bodies facing one way. We were up on our toes on one foot, while our bodies leaned back in a partial backbend on one another. Renee was positioned at the end of the line in a different stance. She was up on her left toes while her left arm extended out towards us, her right arm and leg extended completely up, reaching for the ceiling.

Unfortunately, this required complete trust in the team. It was a precarious balancing act. We needed the person behind us to remain stable while we maintained our balance and tried to stay still enough for the person in front of us to not lean too heavily back. When we were instructed to turn our head forward where the "judges" would be located, our delicate positions were further compromised.

Bailey had leaned too far over Kayley, causing me to lose my balance as well. Soon we were all toppling over, and Wendy, who had been in front of me, stomped down on my left foot as she tried to regain her footing. She completely collapsed, but by some luck, I

was able to catch myself with one arm in an awkward backbend of sorts.

I grimaced as Bailey's foot struck out, kicking my arm. Only Renee was able to escape without ending in our "pile." Wendy cursed loudly and glared up at me as if it was all my fault. A small smirk formed over her lips, and a calculating gleam entered her eyes as she tried to get back up. Warning bells went off in my head, and with quick reflexes, I separated myself from the pile-up. Wendy's head was already in motion.

Where my knee should have been was thin air. Wendy floundered, not expecting my quick reaction, and her head met the floor with a resounding thud.

"You bitch!" Wendy screamed at me.

"Language!" Starr shouted in warning. "Leave that language at the door."

The music was cut off, and Bailey quickly jumped up. "She isn't ready," she screeched, looking at me. "You made us all fall. I'm not getting injured because of gimpy here. She shouldn't be here!"

"Wrong," Alex snapped. "That was all on you, Bailey. And the way I see it is Peyton isn't up to her normal level, but she's still out-dancing you."

"She's still a liability," Bailey argued in return.

It still amazed me how brazen Bailey behaved when Anya wasn't around. She was argumentative and downright disrespectful to Starr and the other instructors. It was mind-boggling that she didn't believe the instructors and choreographers would report her words and actions back to Anya.

"Enough, Bailey," Starr snarled.

"Peyton made me hit my head!" Wendy cried big crocodile tears.

I had to give Wendy an A-plus for her theatrics. She was the consummate actress, and if I didn't know, without a shadow of a doubt, that she had planned to hurt me, I would believe her myself.

"You were going to head-butt my knee," I snarled as I reached down to help Kayley up.

Kayley gave me a grateful smile as she cradled her elbow, wincing in pain.

“She’s not strong enough to hold up her own weight, let alone anyone else's,” Wendy pouted as she squared up to Alex and pointed at me.

“You don’t think we have eyes?” Starr hissed back. “Bailey and Wendy, we have given you enough chances. Buckle down or you’re kicked off the team.”

Wendy immediately snapped her mouth closed while Bailey continued to argue.

“You can’t do that.” Bailey’s beautiful features were twisted in an ugly sneer. “My mom already paid for the costumes, registration fees, and participation fees.”

“You signed a contract,” Alex reminded her with a glare. “At any time, you can be removed, and no−” she continued with her hand raised—"you can’t and *won’t* get a refund. Now let’s start from the top, but Bailey, you’re last in line. Wendy, you’re behind her. Kayley, do you think you can be the base?” Kayley quickly nodded. “And Peyton, you can position yourself between Kayley and Leanne.”

I gave the nod.

Starr originally had us lined up so that the “biggest” girl− not that any of us would ever be described as thick, by any means− was the base, while the rest of us lined up by size. I may be one of the tallest girls on the team, but I didn’t have the physical sturdiness of others.

If I were at a hundred percent, I wouldn’t have doubted my ability to hold up the others, but I wasn’t. I knew the dance was already wearing on me. We had been at it for an hour and my body was already screaming in protest. After so many weeks of inactivity, it continually reminded me that it wasn’t in peak shape or anything remotely close to it.

“Okay, girls, from the top,” Alex said in a no-nonsense tone.

We all took our spots as *Leave a Light On* began once more. I got lost in the lyrics as my body performed the movements. Renee was taking the lead today and performed her parts flawlessly. We all took our cues from her. It wasn’t set in stone that Renee would be the lead this weekend, but I could already tell it would be her or Kayley.

It was abundantly clear that Starr and Alex had faith that I could perform with the others and blend in. However, I wouldn't and couldn't function as front and center for any length of time. I already had enough on my plate with my duet this week, and they weren't going to overwhelm me any further.

Even with my "back-up" position, I still tried to emote to the song's lyrics. I tried to imagine how the writer felt when they tried to convince the person they loved that they would be there for them. That they recognized the person they cared about was seeking the darkness but wanted them to know they didn't want to lose them to drugs. That they would "leave the light on" for them to make their way back "home."

When we got back to the part in the song where we were supposed to line up and do the tricky movement of leaning on each other, I immediately felt the difference. Kayley held firm, and Leanne was strong enough to barely need me.

I couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief as Bailey unbent and went into the fifth position. She extended her arms into a right L. Then she had to *chassé*, put her arms in the first position, and do a *décollage* at a forty-five degree angle. She took a couple of steps, did a switch tilt, tucked her right leg back, and rolled.

Her movements caused a chain reaction when she had her arms into the right L; the next person went, and so on. I could tell some of us were a few beats behind, and some of us, including me, were a bit sloppy, but at least we made it further than we had thus far.

I could have cheered when the song ended and we were finally able to do the whole number without stopping.

"Okay, from the top. Renee and Kayley switch places, and we'll see how this goes," Alex instructed.

This number was technically demanding, so I knew the pressure was on Renee and Kayley. They not only had to learn the part of the lead but the group's as well, memorizing both and performing them flawlessly. I was happy for them, even though I wished I was capable of being in the running for the lead as well.

The performance would definitely be talked about for weeks in the dancing world. Not only because Anya, Alex, and Starr had

bumped up the difficulty level, but we planned to leave an impression with the message. I'd heard the costumes were breathtaking, and the makeup and props would be more dramatic than ever. They hoped to leave the audience stunned and completely captivate the judges.

"Can we have a quick water break?" one of the girls huffed.

I was pleased to see I wasn't the only one suffering today. Typically, I could have continued going, and I wouldn't have wanted to stop until we completed the number at least a few more times correctly. However, I already felt like I was running on fumes. I was in desperate need of a break.

Alex looked up at the clock and then nodded. "Let's make it quick. I'll give you five. We have thirty minutes to run this piece a few times before we evaluate the solos."

I was one of the first ones over to my water bottle. I picked up my towel, wiped the perspiration off my neck and face, and guzzled my water down. My stomach grumbled in protest, wanting more sustenance.

"How are you doing?" Starr asked sympathetically.

I jumped slightly but then feigned a smile. "I'll get there," I reassured Starr.

I hadn't failed to notice how Alex and Starr had watched me closely. I knew they were concerned about me, but I wished they wouldn't make it so noticeable. Their intense scrutiny only made me more self-conscious and worried I would fail.

I knew my body was telling me to slow down, but I couldn't. I had gotten a small taste of oblivion and I wanted more. Dance had always been an escape for me, and it was proving to be so once more. The more I lost myself in the music and dance steps, the easier it was to forget what I had been through.

"Keep it up," Starr murmured, understanding how much I needed this.

●

"Peyton, this is Desmond, or Des," Sal introduced me to the man standing with him. "He's going to take you to school and will be with you the entire afternoon."

“Nice to meet you.” I nodded at Des as I pulled my wet hair up into a messy bun.

I had lost track of time today and had very little time to shower and get ready for school. I couldn’t blow-dry my hair; so, messy bun it was. It wasn’t how I planned my first day back at school, but at least I was still presentable.

I purposely chose a “cute” outfit in the hopes that people would think I was well put together. I wanted them to believe I wasn’t the girl that had been taken and suffered the ordeal I had. I was hoping if I were pretty enough on the outside, they wouldn’t attempt to search for the cracks.

I had to admit I had done a good enough job, nearly fooling myself. I had carefully applied my makeup to hide the dark bags under my eyes and put some color on my pale washed-out complexion.

I had a pair of dark skinny jeans on with tears strategically placed on both legs. I put on a long white tank top, with a wide belt across my slim waist. I also had on a thigh-length camel-colored cardigan opened over it. My heeled ankle boots were camel-colored as well. The scarf I chose for today was a mixture of browns with deep burgundy high-lights.

For anonymity purposes, I put a pair of oversized sunglasses on. I didn’t know how or who told the news outlets my whereabouts, but we were aware of their presence when we prepared to leave the coffee shop. Luckily, we could slip out of a back door before they’d discover me, but I knew I wasn’t going to be as lucky a second time.

“The truck is out back, Ms. Delaney,” Des murmured.

“Thank you, but please call me Peyton,” I insisted.

I was still trying to get used to having a constant shadow. Now, it would seem, I would have to break in quite a few of them until I decided who would work out for my family at the Issacs’.

“See you later, Peyton.” Sal nodded at me. “Have a good day at school.”

I really liked Sal, and I’d miss him when he moved on. I wasn’t sure when he would no longer be needed, but he had definitely grown on me.

As planned, Sal was taking Renee to school and heading back to the house afterward. He was now in charge of the guards we left behind and security there, replacing Cooper. Grandpa had told us he would move Cooper to the big house, and Sal would take over his position as head security.

A small smile curved my lips at his words. “Thanks, Sal. I hope you have a good day, too. See you at school, Ray.”

Renee smiled and wiggled her fingers at me. “Later, Peyton.” She followed Sal out the door.

We had planned to drive separately until the media frenzy died down, and I was happy when I’d found out that my family made sure Renee still got rides to and from school, even in my absence.

Des ushered me to the side exit. It was technically an alley and had a gate, giving us an alternate means of leaving. We already knew that most news outlets expected me to exit at the front of the building. Luckily, the alley was fenced off, and the owners of the building next to us− a florist shop− had already permitted us to use their entrances and exits.

As if on cue, the door opened, and the older shopkeeper gave us a warm smile. “It’s clear at the side entrance,” she informed us.

“Thank you,” I murmured appreciatively.

It was times like these I wondered if all this cloak and dagger stuff was worth me returning to my typical life. Then I reminded myself that if I continued to hide between gates and doors, my abusers would have won. They already affected my life enough. My determination to reclaim my life was like giving them the middle finger. I would be damned if I had to live my life as a hermit, living in fear because of them.

“Tell me about yourself, Des,” I asked, initiating a conversation as I put my seatbelt on.

After my discussion with Grandpa and Sal this morning, I was determined to get to know my next Shadow. I wanted to make an informed decision and hoped if I gained a rapport with them, they’d be less apt to treat me as Cooper had.

Des shrugged but gave me a sidelong smirk. “Not much to tell. I grew up in Idaho's cornfields with nine brothers and sisters and knew it wasn’t the life I wanted. Soon as I graduated high school, I was

outta there. I joined the military and met some civilian contractors on my trips to the sandbox. They convinced me to broaden my horizons. When I was supposed to re-enlist, one of the guys gave me a card to a private security firm. I got out and never looked back."

I nodded. I couldn't imagine being one of nine kids. As a child, I remembered wishing I had siblings, but it wasn't in the cards for me. And never did I imagine I'd technically have two half-sisters and a half-brother. I couldn't imagine the chaos a family of twelve could garner.

I was sure Lochlann, Paxton, and Golden could relate better than I could. They weren't technically born into a large family, but over time they had one.

"Wow, nine children." I shook my head with a smile. "I couldn't imagine. How about you? Do you have any children?"

Des chuckled and shook his head. "I'm twenty-five and in no rush to grow up. I'll have to grow up, and it's a shit ton to raise a kid. I can barely raise myself." He gave me an *oh-crap* look, and I laughed. I guess he realized some employers might not take his bluntness as favorable.

"There's no shame in that," I said with a shrug.

I wondered if the guys ever had similar thoughts of raising children—though Lochlann was in his early twenties, and Golden and Pax were still technically teenagers. Had they ever doubted their abilities in raising Maisie and Clay? Did they plan on having children later in life?

"Are you okay with children?" I inquired next. "You do realize, if I choose you to be my next security detail, I have children living with me."

He smiled once more. "I currently have eleven nephews and nieces. I love 'em. I'm the fun uncle when I see them, but that's an easy job. I get to return them to their parents when I've had my fill. Plus, your granddad had me watching over the little ones at his house. That little Faith is a hoot and a half."

I smiled slightly. Faith was one of my cousins, and she did have a quirky disposition.

We still didn't know if we should introduce Maisie and Clay to the other children as of yet. When or if we did, I was sure Maisie

would hit it off with Faith immediately. Together, those two would be double trouble.

Grandpa had decided to keep the children home for a while. He had converted the informal dining room into a classroom and had hired tutors. He made that decision based on keeping them out of the public eye, and, quite frankly, Ava, Tormentor, Coach Carson, and Principal Boyd had failed them academically. The older ones could barely read; the younger ones, like four-year-old Chasity and Charity, and five-year-old Gideon, could scarcely say their ABCs.

Ava had wanted to refuse Grandpa's interference, but she technically had no say. Since she hated school, she never tried to educate the kids. Hope, the oldest at nine, said that Coach Carson had wanted to teach them when he could, but it was never a huge priority.

I believed, however, the real reason was they never intended to allow the children to ever leave the cabin in the woods. I imagined they were going to keep them as "ghosts" for their whole lives. They had no birth certificates, no social security cards. There wasn't a record of their existence until Grandpa took them in.

"Peyton," Des broke into my thoughts.

By his expectant expression, I had a feeling he had been talking to me for some time, but I had spaced out. It happened a lot nowadays.

"Sorry, yes, she's a handful," I agreed, a bit chagrined. "Are they adjusting well?"

Grandpa talked about the children all the time, but I rarely listened. A part of me ignored their existence due to their parentage. However, I had grown fond of them during my captivity. It was hard not to develop affection towards them, because, at the end of the day, they were just children. They hadn't picked their parents, nor could they even fully comprehend that their lives weren't… natural, normal.

"As well as can be expected," Desmond replied. He took his gaze off the road for a brief moment and gave me a contemplative look. His eyes were full of questions. I immediately felt tense. I didn't want to answer any questions pertaining to my time in the woods.

“I signed an NDA,” he said hesitantly. “I know the kids were tested, and physically they’re okay, but some of the things they say make me wonder… They don’t behave like normal children.”

His voice trailed off for a moment, then he added, “They say and do things that aren’t typical for children their age. They’re always so quiet. I barely hear a peep from them. Little Gideon accidentally knocked over an expensive vase and it shattered. Mrs. Delaney nearly had a fit, and he went hiding under the bed. It took your grandpap almost an hour to get him out from under there.

“They watch television when your grandpap allows it, and they behave as if they’ve never seen a cartoon. When Miss Delaney glares at them, they all flinch away from her. And your grandpap had that play gym built and they didn’t even understand how the swings and slides worked.”

I cringed but then relaxed slightly. Desmond’s question wasn’t about me or my experience, but the children. I could see the genuine concern in his gaze, so I decided to “throw him a bone,” so to speak. Most of it was public knowledge due to the media.

“I think that’s why Grandpa has them in therapy,” I admitted quietly. “The house they lived in was less than 1600 square-feet. All the boys shared one room, and all the girls another. Their fathers were never a constant in their lives, and I’m not even sure they knew which man was their dad. There were a lot of strange rules implemented in that house. There was no television. They were to be seen and rarely heard, unless directly addressed. I learned the men had… difficult childhoods.

“However,” I continued, “I knew Ava was raised in a somewhat typical household. I’m not sure what the reasoning was behind raising them as she did, except for the fact she’d been knocked up several times the last ten or so years.” I shrugged. “Maybe she was too tired to raise them properly?” I speculated. “Especially since the twins and Aaron’s mom were out of the picture.”

“Aaron?” he asked in confusion.

I grimaced. It wasn’t public knowledge that Aaron still hadn’t been found. The FBI seemed to be reluctant to release that information as of yet.

“There was another boy there.” I shuddered in remembrance. “He wasn’t a good boy,” I said concisely.

I didn’t believe any child was born… bad. However, I seriously felt, to this day, that there was something inherently wrong with him. He seemed to have no conscience and could lie with a straight face. He only seemed to fear Tormentor. Otherwise, he seemed to relish hurting and harming others.

Grandpa and the FBI seemed particularly interested in him for a little while there. All Grandpa would relay to me was that some of the children had shared disturbing information about him. I was unclear on the details, but I knew Grandpa was relieved he hadn’t had to take Aaron in. Not that he would’ve had to, since, technically, Aaron wasn’t his biological grandchild. Knowing Grandpa, though, he still would have. He had a soft spot for all those kids.

Desmond seemed to be processing my words as we pulled up to the school but then tensed. “Duck,” he said suddenly.

I didn’t hesitate or question him as I immediately bent forward, my head to my lap.

After several beats, Desmond sighed. “You can sit up now. Those vultures were camped out at the entrance. I much rather them not knowing you’re in here.”

“Thanks,” I murmured as we slid into a parking spot near one of the side entrances.

He turned off the engine and then turned to me with concern. “Ready?” I knew the concern was directed towards me this time.

I already like Desmond. He put me at ease and seemed to instinctively know not to corner me or ask me triggering questions. He’d been able to extract more information from me than anyone had, without me even realizing it.

I expelled a deep breath and shrugged my shoulders. “I’m going to have to be.”

10

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Undesirable Plans

I smiled when I noticed Crew, Zane, Paxton, and Golden waiting for me at the door. Technically, the fourth-period bell hadn't rung, so they shouldn't have even been out of class yet. We had planned it so that I'd arrive slightly before the lunch bell rang.

"Desmond, this is Crew, Zane, Paxton, and Golden," I introduced the guys. "Guys, this is Desmond."

Crew grunted in greeting while the others at least attempted to shake Des' hand. I hid a smile and shook my head. Crew was just as much a fan of the Shadows as I was.

"Where are we headed?" Desmond asked.

I could tell he wondered why the guys were there to greet me at the doors, but I didn't have the energy even to begin. I was going to let him figure it out on his own.

Desmond took a step forward and scanned the hallways. I could see his military training as he mentally noted the emergency exits, the several points of access from our vantage point, and so on. Since it was the end of the third period, there wasn't anyone lingering in the halls yet.

Since being with Kyler, I noticed many things I would have overlooked in the past. When I was convalescing, Kyler had explained how the military still affected him, in addition to his PTSD. The way he maintained situational awareness was an example.

"Lunch." I slapped a hand to my forehead. "I should have stopped for lunch."

In my haste to get out of the studio, I had forgotten to stop and order something.

"It's okay," Paxton quickly reassured me. "The school lunch isn't *that* terrible."

Honestly, it wasn't. The school boasted a hot bar, sandwich bar, salad bar, and sometimes a baked potato bar or something

similar to it.

“Do you know what you want to eat?” Paxton asked. “I can go get it, and you guys can go get our table.”

“I’ll go with her. You guys can go get the food,” Crew said decisively. “Give me whatever's on the hot bar and a salad, please.”

“I’ll have a salad with Italian dressing and baked potato,” I looked down at the app on my phone. “With bacon, cheese, and sour cream.”

This might have been a small town, but their school was better than any public school I had attended, with an app letting us know about upcoming events, lunch menus, etc.

I was getting ready to close the app when my eyes scanned the week. “Homecoming game is this weekend? And the homecoming dance is next week?” I asked in surprise.

In the back recesses of my mind, I knew the Elite competitions and the homecoming game were on the same weekend, but that fact had completely slipped my mind.

The guys exchanged a glance as we continued to move towards the courtyard. I didn’t relish eating in the chilly weather, but I could appreciate the fact that it wouldn’t be as packed either.

“It’s no big deal,” Zane said, speaking up first. “We’re going to the game, but are you obligated to perform? I’m sure they won’t require it. Plus, we had no plans of going to Homecoming this year.”

“Not unless you wanted to go,” Golden piped up. “I wouldn’t mind having you on my arm this year.”

The guys cut him a glare, and I rolled my eyes. I understood their desire to protect me, but at the same time, I wanted to have the option. After all, this was our senior year. This was an important year for us. We were never going to have the chance to experience these milestones again.

My first instinct was a loud resounding no. However, my second thought was if I hadn’t been abducted, there would have been no question about it. We would have gone, even if it was for a little while. I had never gotten a chance to attend a dance with someone I really wanted to be with.

I didn’t want my circumstances to affect the guys any more than they already had. I could imagine Crew forgoing the social

functions, and maybe Zane; but Paxton and Golden struck me as people who attended all major school functions. Hell, I had just discovered a picture of Golden, Bailey, Zane, Leah, and Paxton—who had brought some girl that hadn't even attended our school—at last year's prom.

"It may be nice to go," I hesitantly said as we reached our table.

Golden gave the guys a smug smile. "Come on, let's go get some grub."

"Desmond, have you eaten?" I inquired, looking at my silent Shadow.

He smiled at me and nodded. "Thanks, I have. I grabbed something on the way to the dance studio. I'm good. If you're good, I'm going to walk around."

I returned his smile and nodded. "I'm good. I have Crew." I winked at my silent protector as Des left us.

I was surprised by the warmth I felt as I sat down. I looked up in surprise and noticed the outdoor heaters they had attached to the side of the building.

"It sucks for the people who like to sit in the middle tables," Crew explained as he sat down next to me, noticing where my gaze was. "We had a few free-standing heaters, but the seniors last year thought it would be funny to move them and place them in random spots. They're also the reason we have cameras throughout the building."

He reached down and linked my finger through his. I sighed and leaned into him. He might not have been a man of many words, but he knew how to make me feel special.

I laughed softly. "Sounds like those seniors were fun."

Crew gave me a crooked smile and shook his head. "At first. But it got old after a while. Instead of one senior prank, they did several. They're the reason why we can't leave campus for lunch anymore as well."

I shook my head and rolled my eyes. "You guys were allowed to leave in the past?"

"Juniors and seniors were allowed to leave campus, just as long as we were back in time for our next class," he explained.

“Some of them never bothered coming back, and some of them would do stupid things around town.”

“Like what?” I asked as I traced my fingers over his muscular forearms.

It felt so normal, having a conversation that didn’t revolve around me and my physical, emotional, or mental well-being. Crew was my most protective guy, but he was also the one who didn’t tiptoe around me the most.

He leaned over and placed a kiss on the corner of my mouth. “Did you really want to go to Homecoming?” he deflected.

I jumped as the bell went off and blew a frustrated sigh from my pursed lips. I was never this jumpy before.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I mean, I never got to go to Homecoming or the prom with someone I actually liked. In the past, I went with the guys that were friends, with whomever Madison was seeing at the time. I always felt like a third wheel.” I shrugged. “I mean, some of the guys were nice, and some of them seemed to have a real interest in me, but I wasn’t interested in them like that. I didn’t like mixing school and dance. I liked keeping them separate. Also, I wasn’t too fond of dating any of the guys who attended my dance school. It was messy at my last dance studio. They all dated and slept around with each other.

“A couple of the guys I met at school never understood my dedication to dance. I was at dance school every spare moment. They couldn’t understand why I couldn’t spend the time with them as most girls my age would have. My free-time was few and far between.”

“OMG, Peyton, you’re back!” I heard a guy squeal seconds before Freddy began to launch himself at me.

Crew was up in a heartbeat and placed himself between Freddy and me. My heart was racing with surprise, and my hands were shaking. I hadn’t noticed the few people who had trickled into the courtyard.

Freddy must have realized how much he surprised me, because he immediately took a step back and frowned. “I’m sorry,” he said like a scolded toddler.

I feigned a laugh and stood up. Crew went to intervene once more, and I placed a staying hand on his arm.

Freddy had contacted me numerous times since my return, and we had talked a lot via text. He had also been one of the first volunteers to man the FBI's phones they had set up the second they had rolled into town.

Zane and Paxton had informed me Freddy had always been there. It wasn't until he passed out from dehydration one afternoon that they finally realized he had been there for three days straight. Freddy had barely eaten, drinking even less. He would sleep in spurts when the phone lines were quiet. But he had become a fixture in the call center. Even after he had been hospitalized, he still returned, albeit on reduced hours.

I embraced him and felt the tremble in his arms. "It's okay. I'm still a bit messed up," I admitted.

Freddy had become a best friend of sorts while I'd healed. He had texted me, regularly—the latest gossip and other light-hearted messages. It had been precisely what I needed while everyone else figured out how to adjust to my new situation.

"Understandably," he said as he stepped back and gave me a scrutinizing look. "Please tell me you're going to class today. My partner sucks." He grimaced.

I rolled my eyes. "Your partner is a better cheerleader, has more experience, and weighs at least fifteen pounds lighter than me. Plus," I narrowed my eyes at him playfully, "as I recall, the last time you were with your partner you woke a few of us up with your nighttime antics."

I knew Madison had become his new partner when I'd left. It had irritated me at first. One, she had tried to take Golden from me, and second, she took Freddie from me. But then I realized I was just being petty… At least where Freddie was concerned. I hadn't been available, and Freddie *did* need a new partner.

He grimaced once more and even reddened as he put a hand at the back of his neck. He kicked at something imaginary on the ground. "That was a huuuuge mistake."

I was sure there was a good story behind that one. Freddy used to have a massive crush on another girl on our team—Heather.

She had friend-zoned him at one point, but I had thought something had started between the two of them. In fact, I was pretty sure something had happened with them, like hooking up. Paxton had suggested Freddy play hard to get, but I thought Freddy took it a step too far when he hooked up with Madison, instead, the night of my party.

“Do tell,” I dragged him over to our table.

I really didn’t want to talk about Madison, but misery loved company and all that. Freddy looked miserable, and I needed the distraction, mostly when I felt the stares of almost everyone as they entered the courtyard.

I could see Desmond out of my peripheral. He stood against one of the walls, his arms casually crossed over his chest, an ankle crossed over the other. I couldn’t see his eyes, but I was sure they were scanning the area constantly.

I didn’t know what kind of danger, if any, I could get into at school. Grandpa, David, and I came up with a slight compromise. The Shadows would have to accompany me to school, but they didn’t have to follow me into the classrooms. I wasn’t thrilled about it, but it was better than the detail assigned to Leah. She had no say. Her bodyguard would accompany her everywhere, save the bathroom and locker room.

Freddie made a wry face and shook his head as he pulled out a brown paper bag with his lunch in it. “I'd much rather not. I screwed up big time, and there’s no going back from here.”

He looked despondent for a moment, and I felt terrible for him. I reached out and squeezed his arm.

“Talk to me, Goose,” I coaxed.

“I feel the need…” Golden teased as he placed a tray in front of me.

“…for speed,” I joked back.

Golden was my movie and TV series buff. He quoted lines from movies all the time. He had been somewhat appalled when he found out I had never watched Top Gun. He made me watch it, and I had to admit I’d found it entertaining.

I noticed the guys had returned, along with Renee. They took seats around the table.

I refused to look up or around as I heard the buzz of chatter increase around me. The tables seemed to be filling up a lot sooner than in the past.

“Aww, aren’t you guys cute,” Freddy said a tad bit sarcastically. “I see you’ve forgiven him.”

I looked at Golden as he scowled at Freddy. “Weren’t you going to tell us how you screwed things up with Heather?” he asked, taking a seat in front of me.

Freddy returned his glare. “With the same girl you cheated on Peyton with? Not that I was dating Heather at the time.”

I tensed up and frowned. Golden’s fist curled around his utensil in anger. I flashed him a narrowed look.

“It wasn’t his fault, though, not like mine,” Freddy said, quickly flashing us an apologetic look, then turned back to Golden. “We all know Madison came onto you.”

Golden’s eyes seemed to be pleading with me to believe him. I slowly let the tension unravel within. I had to trust him. Several people had already made me think Madison had been the one who was always initiating her and Golden’s interactions.

“Okay.” I tried to give an air of nonchalance as I shrugged. “Now spill.” I looked over at Freddy.

He groaned and thunked his head on the table. “Can we talk about the homecoming game this week and the homecoming dance? Our float’s going to look amazing. Will you be done with dance in time to meet us tonight?” He seemed to bounce with excitement, but I frowned.

“Where and when is this float supposed to be built?”

The movement to my right made me realize Zane and Crew were doing that creepy “non-talking yet talking” crap once more. I scowled at them.

Hmm.

Why wouldn’t they have told me? I understood I had been a hermit as of late and hadn’t wanted to leave the house. However, I thought I had made myself clear when I told them I needed to get back to reality if I was to maintain my sanity.

“Your dad’s,” Freddy said as if I were dense. “I mean, your sperm donor. I thought he would have told you? Leah told us you

guys are on friendlier terms now. We plan to meet at seven tonight. David invited the football team to his house, too. He told us he was going to feed us and everything. You didn't know?"

I looked at the guys, Zane and Crew in particular.

"It's no big deal," Zane said with a shrug. "We were going to tell you. Coach Leech told us on Friday, but honestly, I forgot about it."

"It's going to be a long day for you if you do go," Paxton added. "You went to dance, you're at school, and you still have cheerleading and dance again. That would be a long day for me, and I'm…"

"Don't say it," I warned him, pointing my fork at him. I gave the guys an exasperated look. "The decision should be mine to make." I then looked at Freddy. "I'll be there. I don't have a solo, so I should be out by six-ish."

I could tell by Freddy's rapt attention that he was loving the drama folding out in front of him. "Want me to come pick you up?"

"I'll pick her up," Crew nearly growled at him.

I sighed heavily. I really didn't want to go. I had no interest in building a float, and truth be told, I was already looking forward to crawling back into my bed and hibernating until tomorrow morning. Maybe if the guys had allowed me to make the decision myself, I wouldn't be so adamant about going.

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"Peyton." Ms. Houser smiled as I entered the room. "It's so nice to see you."

"Thanks." I feigned a smile seconds before I yawned.

I was exhausted. I was barely holding on by a thread. A combination of my sleepless night, early morning, dance, and mental exhaustion was quickly depleting my stamina. I was half tempted to ask Desmond to take me home, but I was determined to finish the day out.

I groaned internally at my own stubbornness. I had no desire to meet about the float tonight, but now I had no choice. I had to see it through.

Ms. Houser separated herself from a couple of the freshman girls to make her way over to me. She was now our permanent

coach. In my absence, Selena had been fired. The only reason Selena hadn't been charged with statutory rape was that the guys she hooked up with from the other school admitted lying about their age. They told her they were in college, which would have technically made them over eighteen.

"Are you ready for class today?" Ms. Houser asked as she scrutinized me.

It was the same in every class, and it was wearing on my nerves. If my classmates weren't trying to make small talk with me, the teachers asked me if I was okay.

No, I was still on the verge of a panic attack at any startling sound or movement. No, it didn't help that I felt and heard the stares and whispers throughout the day. No, it didn't make me feel any better when Desmond had to confiscate several cell phones today because some of my peers had no respect for my privacy.

So, no, I wasn't okay, but I was never going to be okay if my experience defined who I was. I was busy trying to shove the last month into my past, yet everyone wanted to drag me back into it.

I faked another smile. "I'm not a hundred percent, but I'm cleared to resume my normal activities," I state.

Ms. Houser once had a crush on Kyler. They met right after she moved into town. During my absence, he had sold her one of his flips. Since then, she had asked him out a couple of times. He had to tell her he wasn't available. After Kyler told me that, my first reaction was jealousy, but then I quickly reeled it back in.

Kyler was upfront and honest with me, and I didn't blame the woman for wanting him. He was hot and successful in his own right. He was a catch by anyone's standards. She had immediately backed off, and I respected her a whole hell of a lot more.

Plus, Freddy had nothing but good things to say about her. Apparently, she made the squad a squad once more. Though we were stuck with our original miniscule uniforms and still had dance routines, Ms. Houser had turned it back into a sport. She also had competitions scheduled for us.

I didn't think I would make every one of them, but at least the others had the opportunity to participate. Dance would always take precedence over cheer for me, and she understood that.

“Don’t be afraid to take a break when you need to,” Ms. Houser said in a hushed tone. “Don’t even ask. Do what you need to do. Okay?”

My smile was genuine this time. “Thanks.”

It was a better approach than my Chem teacher had done. I swear the man had asked me no less than ten times if I needed to take a break. The first time was sufficient, but all the other times brought more attention to me than I wanted.

“Okay, ladies and gents,” Ms. Houser stated with a clap of our hands. “Let’s do a few laps around the gym, then do a quick warm-up before we jump into our new routine. It's four days until Homecoming, and we’re expecting a packed house!” she said excitedly.

We were playing one of our biggest rivals. It was senior night for us, and rumor had it college scouts would be in the stands. Coach Carson had been respected. He had worked hard to get recognition for the guys on his team, but he didn’t have the new head coach's connections. Apparently, Coach Leech had gone to the same school as Lochlann and Principal Fanning. He had graduated the year before Principal Fanning and was headed to the NFL when he got into a freak car accident. He had been paralyzed from the waist down for nearly a year, killing all his NFL dreams.

Since then, he had become a motivational speaker, and it wasn’t until he heard about Coach Carson in the news that he reached out to Principal Fanning. According to Crew and Zane, he had asked if he could assist in any way. Principal Fanning had jumped on the chance to bring him in. Coach Leech had dived into coaching immediately.

Poor Principal Fanning had come to our school at a tumultuous time. He had replaced Principal Boyd, had to deal with the Selena situation, handle the media when Claire had been taken, then me, and then deal with the aftermath of Coach Carson's arrest. He was definitely going through a trial by fire.

I left the dance room, trailing behind most of my classmates. My feet felt like lead, but I still took off at a gentle jog. Zane’s last class of the day was assisting the gym teachers with the lower

classman. He was currently trying to teach one of the girls how to serve a volleyball. I had to smile and roll my eyes.

It was clear how the girls hovered around him and giggled that they just wanted to be close to Zane. As if he sensed my eyes on him, he looked up. His beautiful Greek-god-like features softened, and he gave me a huge smile and wink. Butterflies took flight in my stomach. I hoped I'd never lose this feeling of excitement with the guys. Even in dark moments like this, they could bring me light.

"Are you going to ever talk to me again?" Madison asked as she jogged up beside me.

I sighed. This confrontation was the second time today Madison had tried to corner me to talk to her. I respected her tenacity. However, I wished she would understand that I wasn't ready to talk to her, if ever.

"What is there to talk about, Madison?" I deadpanned. "I was abducted, and in my absence, you moved in on one of my men."

"I didn't know you were that serious with him," she almost whined. "You have five other boyfriends. You never cared when guys moved on to me in the past."

I nearly tripped over my feet as I shot her an incredulous look. "You're right," I admitted. "I hadn't cared in the past, but at least you asked. None of those other guys mattered to me. You knew that these guys were different. I was gone. Missing. *Taken.* Those guys, you, Lucas, my grandfather, the kids, that's the only thing that got me through some of those days. It was the only thing that made me continue fighting!

"What would've happened if Golden had reciprocated your feelings? Say I would have returned months from now, only to find out that two people I trusted betrayed me? Imagine for one moment that the circumstances were reversed. Even if I had started having feelings for someone you liked, I would have separated myself from the situation. I would have respected your absence and prayed for your return."

I took a deep breath before continuing, "Instead, when I return, you and Golden are all wrapped up in each other. You claimed to have moved here for *me*, got close to everyone I came to care about, *for me*. Maybe that was the case, initially, but it soon

became about *you* and what would make you happy. The first few days I returned home, you were still trying to seduce him."

I look over at her and see her open her mouth. I hold a hand up. "Don't deny it, Madison. You knew he was struggling with guilt, and maybe at first, you wanted to comfort him. You never had to take it to the next level."

"I'm sorry!" she insisted. "I really thought Golden liked me. He was always so nice to me, and it's been a long time since I felt that… safe."

I had to refrain from snorting. Instead, I rolled my eyes in exasperation.

Maybe if I hadn't known what a privileged life she led, I would be inclined to believe her, but she didn't know what it was like to worry about going home. She never came home to an empty fridge and pantry. She never had to hide so that the monster that lived with you forgot about your existence. She never had to hear her mother's excuses for why she could not leave a perilous situation. She didn't know what feeling unsafe meant.

"Seriously," she pleaded. "I read the signs all wrong. I thought Golden was so sweet because he liked me. If I had known it would hurt you so much, I would have avoided him. How can you forgive him so easily but continue to shun me? I love you. You're my best friend. What can I do to make things better?"

I abruptly stopped as we returned to the dance room. I didn't need the rest of the room to fall privy to my personal life more than they already had.

"I forgive him because he didn't kiss you," I seethed. "*You* kissed him. I forgave him because the guys said he didn't flirt with you. He was his normal friendly self—the same as Pax. Did you think he was flirting with you, too?" At her guilty look, I continued, "No, because you weren't as attracted to Pax as you are to Golden. I find it hard to accept your apology because I genuinely believe if I hadn't returned, you would have continued your pursuit of him.

"Ever since boys entered the picture, I was okay with being in your shadow. I didn't mind when I began to like someone and you'd ask me if it was okay to talk to them. I didn't have the time or energy to devote my life to them, and I convinced myself if they actually

liked me, they wouldn’t notice you flirting with them, or they’d not ever care.

“When I found out you and Lucas went to Clementine's party on a night I needed you, I forgave you. I reasoned that you didn’t know what a monster Sean truly was, and I shouldn’t expect you to ditch Clem because I didn’t get along with her. I knew you guys traveled in the same social circles. I’ve always been your wingman, Madison. I’ve always stood by your side. When you wanted me or needed me, I was there for you. And the one time I needed you, the most important time, you failed me. Seriously, how would you feel if I started pursuing someone you sincerely cared about, maybe even loved, while you were being nearly tortured to death?”

Her face paled, and tears entered her eyes. She said nothing, though.

“Just as I thought,” I said a tad bitterly.

“Come on, girls,” Ms. Houser prods from the open doorway. She looks at Madison, then me, then back at Madison. “Everything okay?”

“Yup,” I said a bit flippantly before I marched into the room.

I was far from okay, but it was somewhat cathartic to finally give Madison a piece of my mind. However, my heart hurt because she had been my best friend. She wasn’t always so selfish, like when she was always giving me the clothes she didn’t want any longer. Plus, her parents had paid for my cell phone service once upon a time.

My heart wanted to cling onto the friend I’d known for fifteen years. It was my head trying to convince me that real, authentic friends wouldn’t have taken my kindness and accepting nature for granted.

There had been a line Madison shouldn’t have crossed. She had no regard—still didn’t—for my feelings at all.

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Family Secrets

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Paxton gently nudged me.

I startled awake and blinked owlishly. I didn’t mean to fall asleep, but Paxton’s truck was cozy and warm when I climbed into it after he picked me up from dance. Crew texted me to let me know that Coach Leech had extended their practice and Paxton volunteered to pick me up.

I looked out the window and noticed that nearly the whole football team and cheerleaders were already gathered around a large flatbed trailer, where I noted Crew carrying building supplies. I took a moment to admire the flexing of his muscles.

I was really starting to resent my forced chastity. My guys were gorgeous, and it wasn’t fair that they put the brakes on our intimate relations, especially since I was with them 24/7. It was akin taking someone who was on a diet to a bakery and leaving them there. I, for one, refused to continue this forced celibacy.

My eyes sought out Zane, and I spied him unraveling poultry wire. My eyes narrowed when I noticed Leah leaning over him. It still ground my gears how much she still pursued him. When I was gone, I’d heard that Leah had tried to ingratiate herself back into his good graces. She would attempt to show up wherever he was, and he had to remind her several times that he was with me.

I gritted my teeth when I observed her reaching out and pushing a lock of hair off his forehead. She’d lost the right to touch him when he broke up with her.

“Yes.” I nodded absently, answering Pax’s question. “It looks like I have to remind my dear old sister that I’m back and that she needs to leave my man alone. Plus, I’m hungry.”

Zane had already informed Lochlann and Kyler that we weren’t coming home tonight, so they had taken Maisie and Clay out to dinner with Mr. Jenkins, our neighbor. I wished I could have seen

them for a little while, mostly since things were still so awkward with Lochlann. After school, I tried to inform him Grandpa knew about us, but he was in a meeting with another student.

I wanted to reassure him that our relationship didn't bother my grandfather and to see if we were okay. I hated the look of guilt in his eyes last night. It pained me to know our relationship was putting him through so much.

"We could have stopped somewhere." Paxton frowned at me. "And I think Zane can handle her." He gave me a crooked smile.

I smiled back before leaning over the center console to place a kiss on his lips. "I needed the power nap more, plus I heard David ordered a huge spread for us. I trust you guys, though. I really do."

He grabbed me by the chin and pulled me in for another kiss. I felt the smooth ball of his tongue ring skim my lips, and I opened my mouth to grant him access to my mouth. I moaned quietly as he erotically stroked his tongue with mine. I hadn't been intimate with Paxton yet, but I thought about it often. Too often, honestly.

He threaded his fingers through my hair and tilted my head to deepen our kiss. I was seconds away from climbing into his lap when a loud knock sounded on my window. I yelped and pulled back.

My door was yanked rudely open before I noticed Leah standing on the other side. "What the hell are you doing here?" she said through clenched teeth.

I had been lulled into a sort of complacency where Leah was concerned. She had completely ignored me in cheer class, and I was more than copasetic with her indifference. I believed Ms. Houser's presence had kept her in line.

From my understanding, Ms. Houser only accepted her back on the condition that she'd be on probation. She had to walk a line in all her classes. If there was even a whisper of her falling behind, disrespecting teachers, or bullying anyone, she would be permanently expelled from school. She had zero strikes left.

The beauty in it all was David wouldn't question her expulsion. He had already let it be known that he was keeping an eye on all his children. Claire being taken had been a huge wake-up call for him, I thought. It took him a while to open his eyes to how very little he knew about his other children, but at least he had come around.

“Umm, we’re decorating the float tonight?” I rolled my eyes.

I guess the truce was called off since we were no longer in school. I didn’t want to deal with Leah’s dramatics, but I had to integrate with society.

“Don’t you think you’ve done enough?” She leaned in and hissed at me, “You’re not welcome here. You got my brother suspended. You got me kicked out of school. You nearly ruined my senior year. You got my captain spot taken away. And now, my mom and dad are always fighting because of you. Just because your mother was a whore and ran off with some rando and your dad likes to slap you around doesn’t mean you have to ruin my family. *My* family. You’re nothing to us.”

I narrowed my eyes at her as she continued her little fit. She behaved as if her words had any effect on me. She was like a broken record; I had heard all this before. She had zero ability of hurting me with her nonsensical babble.

“Since *you* came into our lives, you’ve caused nothing but trouble. Go back to whatever hole you crawled out of, Peyton. I don’t want to see whatever crap you’re going to drag my family and me into next. My sister was taken because of *you* and then *you* drag back that psycho and her crotch goblins and thrust them upon us. Leave and take them with *you*. I wish *you* would have died in that hell hole.” She shook her head. “I can’t even believe Zane still wants you, knowing *you* whored yourself out to Principal Boyd and Coach Carson.”

At first, I wanted to take the blame she was laying on me. Claire had been abducted because of me− in a way. It had been a case of mistaken identity. They assumed she was me when she was on the way to my house to vandalize it.

But then my guilt turned into anger. I didn’t have control of the situation between David and Catherine. I hadn’t asked to be his bastard child. And Leah and Dylan had gotten themselves in trouble without any help from me. Their hate for me had crowded their better judgment. I didn’t force them to bully others. That was the decision they had made on their own.

I saw red. I got out of the truck, forcing Leah to move back as I stood before her. I raised my fist to punch her hateful, jealous

mouth when my hand was quickly intercepted.

“Do *not* touch my daughter,” Catherine snarled at me.

My eyes snapped to her and my jaw dropped.

Catherine had never been a big woman. She didn’t have much weight to lose to begin with. Standing before me now, she looked nearly emaciated and twenty years older. Her face was gaunt, and her collar bone protruded at an unnatural angle. Her once lustrous blond hair was limp despite her apparent attempt at styling it. Her heavy makeup couldn’t cover the stress lines around her lips, forehead, and chin.

She looked positively haggard. I knew she had taken the news of Claire's disappearance hard. I was aware that the doctor had prescribed her sleep aids and anxiety medication, but I guess I had assumed she would have bounced back slightly by now.

Anger still coursed through my veins as I glared at her in return. “Teach your daughter to watch her mouth if she can’t handle the consequences, Step-Mommy,” I added as a dig.

Catherine's face flushed red with anger. “You are nothing but my husband's bastard. He never wanted you. If he did, he would have wanted to take an interest in you, but he knew what a slut your mother was and was probably afraid you’d be the same.”

“Mrs. Delaney,” a guard said in warning. Grandpa had hired a sleuth of new guards. Usually they blended in and checked for any threats. He looked uncomfortable as he looked between me and her. He then looked over his shoulder as if he wished someone could tell him what to do.

Catherine reached out and gripped my chin in a painful grip, and out of nowhere, Paxton, who’d gotten out of the truck, snatched her back. Zane appeared as well, helping Pax hold her back.

She turned an evil stare at them but then whipped her head back around, a nasty smile curving up her lips. “Just like your whore mother. The guys you’re shacking up with weren’t enough for you, huh? You seduced Coach Carson, found out he had some friends, convinced them to take my Claire, and then cried *kidnapping* when you realized it was a little more than you anticipated.” She shook her head in disgust.

“Catherine, you’re causing a spectacle,” Zane said sternly. “You’re spouting lies, and honestly, you sound crazy.”

“I don’t care!” A glint of madness entered her eyes. “She staged her return so she’d look like a damn hero when we all know she was the person behind it all.”

Zane and Paxton attempted to subdue her, but she wasn’t having any of it. She turned and looked at me. “You’re a slut! You’re a whore!”

“Enough, Catherine!” David bit out as he rounded the corner of the house.

The only silver lining I could find in this situation was that most of my classmates seemed oblivious to the family drama unfolding approximately fifty feet away. However, it didn’t look like it was going to stay that way for long. Kasey and Casey were on their way over right now, and Crew seemed to have picked up on the drama as well.

“I told you, David, I don’t want her here,” Catherine snarled.

David moved forward. He seemed aware of the possible attention we’d be drawing any time now. “I don’t care what you want,” he said in a quiet but deadly voice. “She *is* my daughter, and this is my father’s house. She can come by anytime she wants.”

She laughed maniacally. “Just another one of your dirty little secrets. You promised me that *it* was taken care of, yet here *it* stands before me.”

I blinked in shock, realizing I was the *it* she was referring to. In doing so, she just contradicted everything I had believed up until now. I was under the impression she had no clue who my mother was, let alone that she had been pregnant with me. It was apparent she assumed my mother was going to get rid of me instead of keeping me.

I didn’t know if David was under the same assumption, but it shocked me, nevertheless.

“And why are we living with your father, anyway?” Catherine gnashed her teeth together, continuing. “You moved us out of our house, promising it was only going to be temporary. We’ve been here for two years! *Two years!* You are just as responsible for Claire's abduction as your little whore daughter.”

“I won’t stoop to your level and throw out names, but you forget I dated your daughter,” Zane growled. “If we’re talking about morals or lack thereof, you should look in your own household.”

“Well, I’m not as polite as Zane,” Paxton butted in, snorting. “Your lack of parenting skills was proven long ago. And lying to your husband about your children's behavior? Probably the most detrimental thing you could have ever done. You were content being the housewife and spending the money your husband was bringing in, but you forgot to do your job. Before she was taken, *your* younger daughter was frequenting online dating sites. Your son’s a pothead and was distributing said drugs, if not still. And Leah lost her virginity to her cousin when she was twelve years old. I’m not slut-shaming, by any means, but before you start throwing stones, let's not forget the glass house you live in.”

“He wasn’t my cousin by blood,” Leah protested, as if that was the most concerning thing from Paxton's outburst.

“Let’s take this inside, Catherine, you’re causing a scene,” David hissed as he noticed people wandering towards us.

“I don’t care,” Catherine nearly screamed. “Claire is seeing a therapist because of you and your daughter. You move your whore sister in with all her kids. You insist on talking to your bastard daughter, even though she’s the one who made our life a living hell. I’ve had enough, David, and I’m taking my children from this toxic environment.”

“Mom, we’re not leaving,” Dylan said from behind me, startling me.

I turned around and saw that Claire was by his side, tears coursing down her face. I could see how protective Dylan was as he hovered over his younger sister. I hadn’t seen either one of them since Claire and I had left the hospital.

“Pack your bags, we’re leaving. Claire, you don’t need to face your nightmare every day, and that’s all you’ll do if we stay here!” Catherine screamed frantically.

“Where would you go?” David furiously asked.

“Don’t you worry about me,” Catherine snarled. “Let’s go, kids!”

“I’m staying,” Dylan reiterated.

“Me too,” Claire sobbed.

Catherine looked like she was going to burst a blood vessel. “Let’s go, Leah.”

“I can’t…” Leah shifted uncomfortably. “I have to decorate my float. I can’t just leave my friends.”

Catherine looked torn between tears and anger. She glared over at David. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyers. This place isn’t safe for my kids, and you fail to see that.” She began to storm off but not before she glared at her children.

“You’ll be hearing from ours as well,” Grandpa stated as he walked towards us.

I could see the anger in his eyes. I turned and noticed a wall of guards had prevented our classmates from coming any closer and knew Grandpa had heard enough to have the guards keep our overcurious neighbors at bay. That was a small plus, at least… silver linings and all that.

Less than ten minutes later, Catherine was peeling down the driveway.

So, of course, the gossip mill began anew.

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“Can we talk?” Claire murmured a while later as she sidled up next to me.

I had picked one of the jobs that kept me away from most of my other classmates. The guys wanted to follow, but honestly, I just needed a little time to process everything. It looked like my short reprieve hadn’t lasted that long, thought.

“What about?” I asked.

I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want to be here. I wanted to go home, curl up in bed, and sleep until the weekend. I didn’t know why I thought this would be a good idea.

“I never got a chance to thank you for bringing us home, and I wanted to apologize for my mother’s behavior,” Claire said. “The night I was… taken, I planned to vandalize your house. I say that was karma coming around a lot faster than I anticipated.”

I tied a balloon to the chicken wire, contemplating my response.

“I couldn’t leave you, and you’re not responsible for your mother’s actions,” I said. “You can’t take any blame for your abduction any more than I can. What those men did to us was due to their depravity. We didn’t deserve any of it. But there’s one question I have.” I turned to her with a mixture of hurt and anger.

I still lived in fear, knowing Tormentor roamed freely somewhere. Claire and Ava had claimed he had never been there. Because of them, I was continually anticipating his appearance back in my life. Once the media released our escape, I knew he would resent me for taking his “family” away from him.

“Why did you tell the FBI that Pearce wasn’t there?” I elaborated. “Why are you and Ava protecting him? He *took* us. He hurt us, and goodness knows what he did to Aaron and Chasity and Charity’s mom.”

Claire looked down her interlocked fingers and shrugged, looking somewhat ashamed. “I love him,” she mumbled. “I know I’m fourteen,” she quickly interjected as I began to argue that logic. “I’ve been with many boys and men. I know what love is. Sure, he was tough on me at first, but he was really sweet to me when we were alone.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose in frustration. I knew there was no convincing Claire about her flawed belief. “He kidnapped us. He raped you. He *burned* me. He took some of our trust in the world away from us… trust we’ll never get back.”

I wasn’t trying to discredit Claire due to her age. I knew having older siblings made her grow faster than many of her peers. I was even certain her experience with older men made her mature a lot faster. However, at the end of the day, she was emotionally immature. I was confident that she would look back at this experience one day and realize it wasn’t all sunshine and roses.

“Reginald and Carson took us,” Claire refuted. “And Pearce never raped me. I wanted to be with him. I’m sorry he hurt you. He had a rough past. Sometimes things triggered him. I know I’ll be forever changed by that experience but,” she shrugged, looking off into the distance, “it changed some things for the better. My mom is still struggling, but I can’t ever remember Dad being this attentive. He took Leah to dinner, Dylan to a football game, and me to the movies.

I can’t remember the last time he spent any time with us outside of Sunday dinners. He’s taking an interest in our lives, and he doesn’t work nearly as much as he used to.”

I wanted to be happy for her. I’m glad she got her father back, in a way. However, because of her unwillingness to tell the truth, I would forever be looking over my shoulder unless the FBI could link Pearce to the cabin and us.

“Hey, Peyton? Food’s here,” Paxton stated as he held a hand out to me.

I gladly took it. Paxton pulled me close so our bodies were brushing. I could see the concern in his gaze. He cupped my cheek, and I leaned into his hand, sighing. I was thankful that he seemed to ground me with a simple touch.

“Do you mind if I come join you?” Claire piped up. “Leah won’t let me hang out with her anymore. She hates that I get *all* the attention. As if I wanted this kind of attention.” She grimaced.

I felt Claire's hopeful gaze on me. I wanted to hate her. I tried to keep my distance from her, but this tragedy had linked us forever. Sure, she began to love her captivity, but she had experienced what I had, to a degree.

It was an undeniable link that would tether us together. Plus, a small part of me reluctantly recognized that Claire was my half-sister. It was apparent she was attempting to forge a bond between us. It was easy to remember her abhorrent behavior before her abduction. However, it was clear this experience had changed her as well.

I nodded. “You coming?” I asked her.

She seemed surprised by my invitation, but she still popped up and smiled. “Really? I wish Dad would let me go back to school. I’m amazed he even permitted Leah to host the float-making here. I’m glad he spends more time with me, but sometimes I swear I can’t use the restroom without him wanting to know where I’m going.”

Paxton squeezed my hand, and we walked to the patio where the food was set up.

“It’s good to have a protective father,” I said with a touch of bitterness. I would never know what that was like. Sean seemed only to enjoy inflicting pain on me, which I was sure stemmed from his

own insecurities. Yes, David was trying now, but a part of me felt like it was too little too late.

“After you grab a plate, can we talk?” David asked, appearing as if I conjured him from my thoughts.

“I think she’s had enough attacks tonight, don’t you?” Paxton interjected protectively.

David pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m delighted that Peyton has so many people wanting to protect her. I just want a moment of her time.” He looked at me. “I should have had this discussion with you a long time ago, Peyton. I’m sorry I didn’t, but since,” he barely contained a sneer at this point, “Catherine decided to tell her half-truths, I’d like to tell you my side of the story.”

I sighed deeply.

Why? Why did everyone feel the need to “talk” to me tonight? I didn’t want to talk. I wanted to pretend for two seconds that I was a normal teenage girl in her senior year of high school with her future spread in front of her. I wanted to pretend my past didn’t exist, that my life contained fewer trials and tribulations.

If that which didn’t kill you made you stronger, I should have been strong as hell by now.

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I sat down at the table and immediately took a bite of my pulled pork taco, nearly groaning in satisfaction.

Usually my emotions had a direct effect on my appetite. However, it seemed like subconsciously I realized I needed to eat. I had expended a lot of energy in dance, cheer, and then dance once more. It seemed like I couldn’t eat enough today.

“What did you want to talk to Peyton about?” Paxton asked somewhat disgruntledly before taking a large bite of his taco.

Once again, Grandpa had convinced me to talk to David. I didn’t know why I had such a soft spot for that man. Maybe it was because he had shown me more love than any of my other blood relatives had ever shown me.

“I wasn’t a good man,” David began without preamble. “I admit it. I had my many faults. I have done many things that I’m not proud of. I cheated on your mother. I was wrong, and I had every intention of doing right by her. However, my mom never liked Priscilla. When

your grandmother found out your mother was pregnant, she told me she would take care of it. And like the young, immature, selfish man I was, I allowed her to. I admit I went back to Catherine and told her your mother wasn't going to keep you.

"When I realized I had been lied to, it was too late. Or so I thought. Sean decided to take care of you both. Mom showed me pictures of you guys, and you looked like a happy family. I was a coward and a disgrace. I should have checked on you. I should have seen if you are okay."

Truthfully, I had run across a few pictures of me as a baby with Sean and Mom. They *had* seemed happy at first. It hadn't lasted, but I knew the photos existed.

"I can understand if you don't want a relationship with me," he continued. "I understand that I don't deserve one. However, I would really love one with you. You are a strong, intelligent woman, and I wish I could say I had a hand in that. It's evident that even with the shit you went through, you have more character and perseverance than your siblings. I'm sorry for all the hateful and ugly words Catherine said to you. It's clear that, even with the odds stacked against you, you turned out better than your siblings."

I would have typically added a snarky comment here, but truthfully, I was tired. I was all emotioned-out− if there was such a thing. I desired only to fight the battles worth fighting. I could see the sincerity in David's eyes, though, and I was trying to be more understanding.

"And I know I'm to blame for their actions and behavior," David continued. "I'm trying to be a better man. Knowing what my brother did to you and how many things I don't even know about my children, who *did* live with me, made me realize that what I thought was important in my life, really wasn't." He shook his head. "What good is all the money in the world if I don't have my family to enjoy it with? I want to be a better man. I want to be a better father, Peyton. I know it won't happen overnight, but I would like to get to know you better. I would love it if you allowed me into your life."

I never believed a leopard could change its spots. However, I had seen the changes David had gone through in the last few weeks. His interest in me seemed purely unselfish. I knew he had a better

relationship with Grandpa. And I knew he stepped up when it came to becoming a real uncle to his new nephew and nieces. He was trying, but I didn't know if I had it in me to get over the fact that he chose Catherine and Leah over Priscilla and me because that's what his mother wanted him to do.

I went through a lot because he couldn't *man-up* and take care of my mother as he should have. Once he found out about my existence, he should have taken an interest. It was convenient for him to form a relationship with me now, and I would always wonder, if I hadn't helped Claire escape, would he have still wanted to get to know me?

"Baby steps," I finally told him reluctantly. "I wasn't aware of my true parentage until I moved here. Up until then, I just assumed my father was a hateful, abusive man. Once I met you, you still weren't the man I dreamed of as a father growing up. I see the effort you have been making lately, but I'm afraid the novelty will wear off once life settles back down," I admitted to him. "I've already given a lot of adults too many chances in my life. I've invested so much in them. I don't want to put myself out there just to get hurt once more."

He gave me a somber smile. "I understand that, and I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I don't expect you to forgive me overnight, or even forget. I just want the chance to get to know you. I'm far from perfect, but I want to be, especially for my kids. Can I take you out for coffee tomorrow after dance, before we come back here to work on the float?"

I sighed internally. I didn't know if I was ready to allow David into my life so soon, but I guess I had to be.

I nodded. "Okay."

He seemed to want to hug me but then quickly withdrew the desire. I looked over his shoulder and saw Grandpa spying on us. I was sure Grandpa was just there to make sure we "behaved" ourselves—David more than me. Grandpa had been prepared to step in if need be.

I gave my grandfather a crooked smile before taking the few steps to accept David's embrace.

All of this was taking an emotional toll on Grandpa. He had been through a lot in the last few months. He was still recovering from his

bout with cancer, and I was determined he'd become utterly healthy once more. If I had to sacrifice a little bit of my happiness to help him recover, I was more than willing to do so.

David seemed surprised and relieved when I hugged him back, and he held me a little longer and a little tighter than I thought he would. Maybe our road to a relationship could be a little smoother than I predicted.

12

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Admissions

I didn't think we would be working so late on the float. It was after ten, and I was disappointed to find Lochlann and Kyler already asleep by the time we came home. I really needed to talk to Lochlann, and as crazy as it sounded, I missed seeing Kyler today.

Since my return, we all relaxed every night in the great room after the kids went to bed. It was nice just to relax and talk for a little while. It was the only time the Shadows didn't seem to be hovering. It had been a comfort and something I looked forward to.

I tried to push away my feeling of disappointment as I entered Paxton's room after my shower. His room was probably the messiest, hands down. Paxton had piles of clothes in several locations. His hamper was almost always overflowing. However, it was one of my favorite rooms. It was him in a nutshell.

His platform bed was the main focal point when you got to the top of the stairs. The dark, nearly black accent wall behind it was a stark contrast to the rest of his walls. The walls surrounding his bed were filled with black and white photos of his family, in white frames and black matting. The wall that had his dressers and desk was also decorated with pictures of colorful sceneries and nature shots.

The wall where his television and surround sound system were located was my favorite. Before I was abducted, I never saw his room. It wasn't until my return that I realized he had dedicated this wall to me, to us. There were a few photos of us the night we took pictures together and from my birthday party, but the rest of the wall was mainly filled with shots I didn't even remember him taking of me. He had been the one to supply the police and FBI my most current photos.

I never considered myself beautiful or terribly photogenic, but he had been able to capture me in the most flattering lights. He seriously had an eye for photography, and I hoped he pursued a

career in it. Otherwise, it would be a complete waste of his natural God-giving talents. He was that good and excellent.

Currently, Paxton was sitting at his desk. *Don't You Worry* by Oh Wonder was softly playing from his speakers. He had three separate monitors open with pictures of tonight displayed on them. He was so zoned in and focused, he didn't seem to even notice I was in the room, finished with my shower.

Watching him in his element was sexy. Only, part of my attraction contributed to the fact he was only wearing a pair of gray sweats. He was muscularly lean, and the tattoo on his back was sexy as well, but his steadfast concentration was what genuinely drew me in. He had some deep-seated scars and insecurities, but they all seemed to vanish now, replaced with confidence that settled over him as he meticulously studied his shots.

I leaned on the doorjamb of the bathroom and watched him as he moved his mouse, erasing any imperfections in individual images and adding filters to others.

Mam might have taught him the basics of photography and gifted him with editing software, but he was naturally talented. Even without the editing software, his shots were breathtaking. The way he could candidly catch someone− most of whom were unaware of his presence− and shine them in a favorable light was impressive.

I made my way across the room and slipped up behind him. He jumped slightly when I placed my arms around his shoulders. I leaned my cheek against the top of his head.

"I'm almost at a stopping point." He gave me a sheepish grin.

"No rush," I reassured him.

I was bone-weary tired, but I wouldn't miss this moment for the world. I liked seeing another side of him and admired the many layers that made up Paxton. He was the flirt, the easy target to his brothers and closest friends, the brother Maisie and Clay gravitated towards to color and create things with. It seemed like I was continually learning new things about him.

I continued to watch him as he displayed three more pictures. I had to smile when I realized he had captured Grandpa and Zane laughing as they attempted to untangle string lights. My family made

me happy, and seeing them captured in such a beautiful way filled me with warmth.

“You are so beautiful,” he remarked.

I smiled once more when I realized one of the monitors had a picture of Crew and me on it. I was standing on the top of the ladder filling in the balloon arch. Crew was poised behind me, a few rungs down, with his hands on my waist. My head was tilted, and I was smiling down at him. I barely noticed myself in the picture; it was Crew that I couldn’t stop looking at. For once, his features were unguarded. He had a gentle smile curving around his lips as he looked up at me. There was no denying the connection we had.

Paxton had captured our heartwarming moment. On closer inspection, I noticed that even my smile was a genuine one. After my discussion with David, I had joined the others. Gradually, everyone seemed to stop staring at me. Zane and Crew’s constant presence appeared to unravel the tight ball of nerves in my stomach. Their attentiveness, and the normalness of it all, made me feel the most relaxed in public than I had been for some time.

“You’re an amazing photographer, Paxton,” I whispered in awe before I placed a kiss behind his ear.

I felt him shudder against my lips. He reached up and pulled me down onto his lap. The office chair tilted back slightly. I had no choice but to lean into him. Paxton’s plain long sleeve t-shirt I’d “borrowed” rode up my legs, revealing my thighs. He cleared his throat.

“You can’t kiss me there,” he muttered before he wrapped my hair around his fist and tipped my head to the side.

There was a sharp sting against my scalp before I felt the wet warmth of his lips, followed by the cold ball of his tongue ring. The conflicting feeling of pain and pleasure was euphoric, to say the least. I gasped as goosebumps erupted on my arms.

“Why not?” I inquired breathily.

I had been horny several times over the last few weeks, and sex had been continuously on my mind lately. However, I hadn’t kissed Paxton, nor had I intended to seduce him. I was just in awe of his talent.

The longer he nibbled on my neck, though, the more that deep yearning rose within me. I could feel my breathing become shallower. I felt the burning heat in my core, seeking a release that I wanted Paxton to give me.

“Because,” his voice came out low and husky, “it’s a huge turn-on for me. The back of my neck and ears are extremely sensitive.”

His other hand made its way to my leg. His long, lean fingers caressed the inside of my knee and sensuously rose to my upper inner thigh. He continued to lick and nibble my neck, and I felt his words as if they were my own. Paxton moaned in the back of his throat before gently sinking his teeth in between my neck and shoulder.

I jerked in his lap and gasped at the painful pleasure it gave me. I pulled away from him, turned, and straddled his lap. I grasped his jaw and kissed him with all the pent-up desire I had been feeling.

He deepened the kiss, and I became more restless. I began to rock against him, and I could feel him grow against me. I let out a sound that was a mixture of a gasp and moan as I realized he was rock hard.

“We need to stop,” he said between kisses and gasps.

But his words said one thing while his lips and hands said another. His hand was buried in my hair, gripping my head like a lifeline. His other hand restlessly caressed my thighs, coming closer and closer to my core. I impatiently ground myself against him, my clit throbbing with every pass against his hardness.

“Why?” I demanded as I leaned forward, swirling my tongue against his earlobe before gently taking it between my teeth and biting down.

He shot up like a rocket. His forearms cradled my thighs, and in a surprising move, he took the few steps to the bed and placed me on his bed. “You’ve had a long day,” he groaned.

I could see the war he was battling from within, his eyes hungrily skimming my body. His chest was heaving as if he had just run a marathon.

“So?” I said with a careless shrug.

I was *so* tired of waiting for my relationship with them to develop and grow physically. I wanted to know what it was like to become intimate with Paxton. Other than making out, we had never made love.

I reached down, and for a split second, my insecurities rose. Paxton had been the one most disturbed by what had happened to me. It was as if my scars and wounds had physically hurt him. His empathetic nature was unable to view my injuries in the beginning without feeling them himself.

He let out an almost pained groan as he dropped to his knees. He grasped my ankles and pulled them towards him so that my legs hung off the bed. He reverently caressed my feet, skin, calves, knees. He dropped his head on the bed in between my thighs and screamed a curse into the mattress.

His hazel eyes were tormented as he finally looked up at me. “I want to eat you out. I want to taste you on my tongue. I want to feel you clench around my fingers as I make you come.”

I whimpered at his words. I felt the wetness between my thighs. With zero hesitation, I reached down and pulled his shirt over my head.

I had a lot to be confident about, but I, too, had my insecurities. My breasts were too small. A lot of my muscle tone from dancing was gone. My ribs were a little too prominent right now. My clavicle looked like it would burst from my skin at any moment. I had lost a lot of definition in my abs. I had a scar beneath my breast hidden behind my tattoo. My arm was riddled with ugly circular pink and white scars from my burn marks. In short, I didn’t feel my prettiest.

All those doubts scattered like leaves in the wind when I saw the hunger in his eyes. In his eyes, I was beautiful, and that concept made me *feel* beautiful. With just one look, he reassured me that my physical flaws were nonexistent. He didn’t see my scars, my thinness, or compared my body to how it once was. He saw me.

Just like when he held the viewfinder of his camera up to his eye, he was able to create beauty where others might have overlooked it. He saw me in a different light. He chose to ignore all my defects and focus on the beauty in me.

“I don’t know who decided I was too fragile to be intimate with you guys,” I said huskily. “I don’t know who thinks they can decide when I’m ready, but this is my body. I know what I can handle and what I can’t, and right now, I want you, Paxton.”

With zero hesitation and a relieved groan, he grabbed my underwear in his hands and shimmied them down my thighs. I lifted my hips, feeling the glide of the fabric against my knees, down my shins, over my feet, and watched as he tossed them to the side.

He kissed the inside of my knee and moaned. “You are so beautiful. I want you, too, Peyton. I’ve imagined this moment a thousand times.”

“You don’t have to imagine it anymore,” I whimpered as his lips trailed against my sensitive inner thighs. “Please,” I nearly begged as his warm breath caressed my core.

“Never, beg,” he lightly nipped my inner thigh, “Tell me what you want. Use me whenever you want. Never, never ask. I’m always yours to take any way or any time.”

The warmth in my chest grew. Was there a way to measure love with time? I didn’t know if it was too early to say I loved him. However, I’m pretty sure this would always be the moment I would remember when I fell in love with Paxton Massey.

His mouth latched onto my clit, and all thoughts were chased away. I didn’t realize how genuinely starving I was for intimate contact until I felt his warm mouth cover me. I moaned and grasped his comforter in a tight grip. His tongue snaked up my slit and circled my clit, and the sensation of his tongue ring nearly had me screaming instantaneously. My hips bucked up of their own accord.

“Paxton,” I panted as he continued to expertly stroke me with his tongue.

The flick of his tongue ring against my sensitive clit was nearly unbearable. The sensations were so intense and acute.

He made a sound of satisfaction as he continued to feast on me like a starving man. I weaved my hands in his hair and thrust my hips to the rhythm of his tongue. I gasped out his name once more when I felt one of his fingers slide into me.

“Come for me, Peyton, let me taste your juices.” He looked up at me with intensity before he slid another finger into me.

I cried out. His tongue ring was relentless against my clit as his fingers slid in and out of me. When he curled his fingers up and found that special spot, stars began to cloud my vision.

The ache in my stomach spread, and I chased my orgasm against his expert ministrations. I gripped his hair, my toes curled, and I cried out when I felt myself hurtling over the edge. He hummed as he caught my juices on his tongue.

My whole body was shaking with the intense orgasm, and I whimpered with surprise. I felt like I was coming back down when Paxton swiped his tongue ring against my overly sensitive clit.

“Paxton,” I gasped and giggled at the same time. “I want you inside me.”

He shook his head. “No. You taste so good. I need more.”

I tried to squirm from his tongue, but he reached up and placed a hand on my pelvis. He emphatically shook his head.

“It’s too sensitive,” I whimpered.

He lifted his head, and with a speed that surprised me, he hovered above me. He had a lust-drugged glaze in his eyes as he grasped my jaw. His mouth lowered to mine. I could taste myself on his lips and feel his tongue erotically entwine with mine.

He linked his fingers with mine, and I could feel his erection against my thigh. I could feel his precum leak on me. *When had he gotten naked?* I moaned at the thought and ground my thigh against him.

“Please let me feel you,” I beg.

“I want more,” he nearly growled in my ear before he was down between my thighs once more.

The sensitivity didn’t completely fade away before another orgasm snuck up on me. I lost all speech and feeling as my second orgasm found me. My body felt heavy and not like my own.

Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I heard him say, “You are so beautiful. I love hearing you call my name, falling apart. I love your taste. I’m hooked, addicted even.”

I felt him crawl up my body again, his mouth and tongue worshiping nearly every inch of me.

“Are you still alive, Peyton?” he asked with a slight smirk in his tone.

I slowly drifted back down to earth and opened my eyes, studying his face. Just like when he was immersed in his photography, I loved this other look on him. No wonder girls chased him at that party we'd attended. He was a magician at foreplay.

He was so achingly handsome. A lock of his light brown hair had fallen over his forehead and into his eye. He was all man but looked boyish with that hair in his eye. My heart melted.

I felt his cock on my belly, and without hesitation, I reached down and grasped him. I wanted to be irritated that he denied me when I wanted to feel him inside me. However, the orgasms he gave me had more than made up for what I thought I'd wanted.

"You told me I didn't have to beg." I gently but firmly squeezed him with a smirk of my own. "I begged for your cock and you wouldn't give it to me."

His eyes rolled in the back of his head, and he groaned, undulating against my palm. "I need a condom." His next groan sounded nearly painful as he said sheepishly, "I don't have any in here. I haven't needed them for a long time."

My eyes widened slightly as his words sunk in. I realized what he was telling me. I was reminded of his wild and crazy side after his parents and siblings passed, which was followed by hooking up with a lot of girls. He had come a long way from the guy who had sex, drank, and got high to numb the pain.

"Not even in your wallet?" I teased him.

"No," he pouted almost boyishly as he dropped his head on my shoulder. "Next time?" he inquired hopefully. "I don't need it. I'm happy I got to watch you fall apart twice and taste you."

I knew this was true from the rumors I'd heard. Apparently, Paxton got more joy from giving pleasure than receiving it. Little did he know, that didn't work for me; I wanted him to join me on the euphoric plane of bliss.

My greedy core was wet. I shimmied slightly up and lined Paxton's cock up to my passage. "Or…" I whispered in his ear before nipping his ear once more. I felt his shudder and heard his groan in my ear. I loved having this power over him. His responses were addicting.

"You can enter me bare," I continued.

His head snapped up, and before he could decide, I pushed the tip of him into me.

“I know you got checked, plus I’m on birth control. Give me your cock, Paxton,” I commanded him.

His eyes had the lust-drugged glaze in them as he bit his bottom lip. “Are you sure?” He eased slowly into me.

“Yes,” I gasped out. Paxton wasn’t as thick as he was long, so long.

He continued to sink into me, and it was almost painful once he was entirely inside. I didn’t know if it was his length or my forced celibacy that caused the slight discomfort.

He intuitively seemed to realize my body needed to adjust to him, despite the two orgasms that should have helped his entrance. He kept his upper body poised above mine, his forearms braced on both sides of my head. A myriad of emotions crossed his face.

“You feel so good,” he groaned into my mouth before capturing my lips with his. “I’m not sure I can last.”

I was unable to respond as he kissed me, which in turn quickly chased away all discomfort. I tilted my hips up, and he gasped, moaning before thrusting out. He began to set a rhythm of short strokes in an attempt to let my body get accustomed to his length.

The fire in my lower belly grew, and soon I was wrapping my legs around the small of his back. I was ready to take every inch of him.

“It’s okay,” I reassured him with a small smile. “You gave me two orgasms. That’s more than enough.”

He shook his head with a look of determination. “That won’t do. I’ve never been or wanted to be bare in a girl. I don’t want to come when I haven’t felt my forever girl come around my dick first.”

He tilted his hips forward, setting an almost painfully slow pace as he pressed against my clit. The sounds of our intermingling moans and groans filled the room.

“More,” I begged him as the sensations of our lovemaking danced across my nerve endings.

I was so close, I could feel it, and I was greedy for it.

Our eyes met, and he picked up the pace, reaching down between us. His thumb circled my clit.

“Let me watch you come,” he commanded.

I nodded and kept eye contact with him, which was hard when all I wanted to do was close my eyes to feel the sensations more acutely. Then I realized the look in his eyes was better than any aphrodisiac. He looked at me like I was his everything, like I was the prettiest damn girl in the world.

“Paxton,” I gasped as he continued to drive in me with an almost frantic pace. I felt another orgasm overtake me, and I heard a high pitch whimpering. I realized it was coming from me right as Paxton leaned down and kissed me.

He gave me all of him with no restraint, and soon was groaning in my mouth. When he came, my name was on his lips.

“I love you, Peyton,” he said in a litany over and over again as I felt him come inside me.

He continued moving inside me until I knew he was spent. When he collapsed on top of me, he was careful not to give me his entire weight, and I smiled against his shoulder.

Once we were breathing normally again, and I could move my limbs once more, he slipped an arm under me and rolled so I could lie on top of him.

I realized then he was quiet. Too quiet. I looked up at him and saw a frown between his brows.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

He gave me a feigned smile that I saw through immediately.

“Never better,” he answered.

“Liar,” I accused.

He turned so that we were now facing. “I never knew it could be like that,” he said quietly. Lying on his side, he propped himself up on an elbow. I shifted, mimicking his pose, a mere six-inches separated us.

“What?” I asked him in confusion.

“Sex,” he muttered, almost in embarrassment. “The connection I feel with you. It’s both terrifying and exhilarating.”

“What’s there to be terrified about?” I inquired softly with a frown.

He trailed his fingers over my ribs and my hips several times. Fear began to creep up, but I tried to be patient as he gathered his thoughts. I knew how he got lost in his head at times. I learned sometimes it was best to just let him formulate his words instead of pushing him.

Finally, he looked up, and I saw a reflection of a very lost and scared little boy.

“Everything good in my life disappears, Peyton. My birth mom was fifteen when she got pregnant with me. My sperm donor promised to stay by her side but skipped town the first chance he got. My birth mom's parents found out she was pregnant and told her she had a choice. She could terminate me or leave. My mom chose to leave. She moved to the city. She dropped out of school. She lived in shelters until she found a laundromat to work at. By the time I was born, the laundromat owner had given her a small room in the back.

“I don’t have many early memories of my mom, but I knew we were happy. On her days off, she would take me to the park. When she earned enough money, she bought us a small television and we would cuddle on our bed and watch movies. I knew we were poor. I barely ever received gifts. I was never full, but it didn’t matter because I knew my birth mom was trying her best. Then, one day, she met this older man.”

I stiffened and slid in closer to him so I could lay my head against his chest. I moved my fingers soothingly over his back. Dread filled my stomach as I imagined what happened next.

“I was around five,” he continued, brushing his lips against my forehead. “He had this weird hold over her. He had power over her, and I didn’t understand. He would take her out on these dates, and at first, she would leave me for a night, maybe two. Every time she returned, I felt like she was changing.

“Eventually, she disappeared for a week or so at a time. She would leave me a box of cereal and maybe some knock-off pop tarts. I learned how to ration them after the first time of eating them within a few days. The owner of the laundromat found out she wasn’t working like she was supposed to and kicked us out. We moved me into this shitty apartment, and things got worse. She was rarely

home, and when she was, she was high as a kite and had bruises all over her. My beautiful young mother had become a shell of herself.

“She taught me how to keep my mouth shut. She told me if anyone found out she had to leave me from time to time, I would get taken away. She said the system would hurt gorgeous boys like me and I believed her. She was the only family I ever knew. Through our thin apartment walls, I could hear the alarm from Ms. Hernadez’s clock. I knew it was time to get up and go to school. If I didn’t go to school, I didn’t eat. I walked to the subway every day, picking up any change along the way to catch it. I would go to school, where I got free breakfast and lunch and learned what kept and what didn’t.”

I tightened my arms around his waist, my stomach roiling with unease at his words. I wanted to hunt his mother down and kill her, if she wasn’t already dead.

“One day, she never came home,” he continued. “The cops caught me digging through the dumpster by this restaurant around the corner. I got placed in the system while they looked for her. I was able to point her out from a mugshot they had of her. She had already been arrested for prostitution, soliciting an officer, and possession of drugs and released several times.

“It took them over a year to find her. By then, I had already been in five different foster homes. I was living with Mam and Da when I was told they located her at a rehabilitation center. She had met a new man, and he didn’t want kids. She had a choice again: me or the streets. She chose her new man. She was charged for abandoning me, but her new man had the charges dropped. I begged to see her. I thought I could convince her to keep me. She sent a letter to me. She apologized for leaving me but explained that she was too young to care for me properly. She told me I would be placed in a better home and asked me never to look for her.”

Silent tears fell down my face, and my heart broke for what he’d gone through. It explained a lot. Now I knew why he had abandonment issues. I understood why he hoarded things in fear of them getting damaged or taken.

“Everything good in my life leaves me,” he whispered once more. “My birth mother, Mam, Da, Duncan, Polly, and Mandy. When you were taken, I thought the universe wasn’t done screwing with

me. I try," he said in a pained voice, "…try to be a good man. I try to do right by others."

I rolled him over so I could straddle his hips. I pushed the hair off his face and kissed his lips. Our tears mingled together.

"You're birth mother is a piece of shit," I told him straight. "You didn't make her disappear or choose a man over you. "Mam, Da, Duncan, Polly's, and Mandy's death was a freak accident. It was the drunk driver's fault for choosing to be so stupid and selfish. We have no control over other people's foolish actions. I was taken because some very sick individuals saw the likeness between my aunt and me. They had created this weird, twisted family and wanted me to be a part of it. Your actions didn't cause my abduction. The universe, God, isn't trying to punish you. You've done nothing wrong, Paxton. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Your behavior doesn't cause your trials. If our actions punished us, then people like Tormentor would have been suffering a long time ago." Then I kissed him once more.

"I'm screwed up," Paxton confessed in a broken whisper.

"So am I," I responded back. "We can be screwed up together, forever."

He took in a few deep, fortifying breaths. "Forever?" He seemed confused for a moment.

"If you'll have me." I nuzzled his neck.

I didn't know what our future held or where our paths would lead us, but somehow I knew, even if those paths split for a while, someday we would have our forever together.

"Of course," he said emphatically. "I love you, Peyton Delaney, and I want forever with you."

I smiled. "Good, because I love you, too."

He cradled my face, a smile curving his lips. "You love me?"

The look of awe and surprise on his face made my heart speed up.

I giggled. "That's what I said, Paxton Massey."

He groaned before rolling me over, then placed kisses on my face, lips, neck, chest and working his way down.

"What are you doing?" I gasped as his mouth hovered over my mound.

“Showing you how much I love you,” he said wickedly before his mouth closed over the top of me.

I groaned as his tongue ring found my clit.

He showed me how much he loved me, well into the night and into the early hours of the next morning.

13

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Undesirable Visitor

It felt like I had this renewed burst of energy. I couldn't explain it. My body was sore, and it felt like every step, every movement, was being squeezed from me, but I fed off it. *Carry You* by Ruelle and Fleurie played from the speakers, and I lost myself in the lyrics, the music, the emotions it evoked in me.

Sweat dripped from my brow as I leaped into my *tour jeté.* I made sure to keep my head elevated and not anticipate the landing. As I was taught, I imagined an invisible string pulling my spine and torso straight up to the ceiling.

I got lost in the music, continued the choreography I had created for this song. As I immersed myself in the lyrics, I realized I was dancing for Paxton. He bared his soul to me last night, and I wanted to make sure he knew he would never be alone ever again. I wanted to hurt his mother. I wanted to be angry at God for what he had been through.

Then I realized that we all had our own paths to follow. We might not know why we went through the stuff we did, or why good people continually suffered, but sometimes there was beauty in the breaking. Call me twisted or deranged, but I wouldn't be half the person I was without the storms I traveled through.

I didn't think Paxton would be the man he was today, either, if it weren't for the trials he had faced. In his pain, I found my strength. In his need for me, I felt a renewed purpose. My fears and pain still lingered on the edges, but they now felt dampened. It was like the sharp edges had been dulled to a blunt edge.

I had set my music on repeat. I went back through the dance moves I had created, adding more technical movements in places where I felt I could push limits. My limbs shook, my heart raced, yet I continued.

Dancing and my night with Paxton brought me peace, determination, and a drive I hadn't felt for some time. I had felt numb for some time, allowing my fears to cloud my vision. I had forgotten the strength I carried within.

I wasn't delusional enough to believe I was cured, or that my triggers didn't exist. I wasn't, and they did. However, I was finding my center once more. Up until this morning, I'd felt off-kilter. I felt like I was literally walking on thin ice and in danger of falling in at any moment.

When the song ended, I shook out my limbs and rolled my neck. I took a long drink from my water bottle. I wiped my brow with my towel and waited for the music to start again.

When it didn't, my brows furrowed, and I turned towards the sound system. Anya and one of the new instructors were leaning on the wall beside it.

The hour before we were dismissed for lunch, Starr and Alex had instructed us to work on our solos, duets, trios, or any areas we might need to work on. They were going to visit us in the practice rooms while we self-practiced.

Zane and I had already worked on our duet before the school opened, and Starr had met us for our practice session. We weren't where we needed to be, but there was a considerable improvement since yesterday. I wasn't sure if it was because I had "let go" or because I'd felt more confident today. Either way, Starr seemed pleased with our progress, and she seemed to believe we would have it nailed down by Saturday.

I also gained confidence in the group number. I had all the moves down and even got a few compliments today. When Alex had dismissed us for self-training, I felt compelled to dance to the song and movements I had stuck in my head since early this morning. Last night, as Paxton and I drifted off to sleep, Ruelle's music had been playing and I took it as a sign.

Zane had humored me on the way to the dance studio and allowed me to play my music. I played it over and over again. I didn't know why some songs spoke to me more than others. Somehow, that song had. I wanted to be the one to carry Paxton and let him

know he'd never be alone again. He had held *me*, and I wanted to be the one to take the heavy weight of his emotions as well.

The younger, new instructor looked positively giddy and clapped her hands in excitement. Anya's school was growing. Whether it was through the free publicity she got from my abduction or the growing recognition of the talent she produced at competitions was still unknown. She had to hire a few more instructors to keep up with her school's new demand and growth.

The new instructor smiled at me. "That was amazing."

I ducked my head to hide the warmth in my cheeks. The song, this dance, was intensely personal. There were some songs and dances I performed that I did just for me. I didn't want them to be opened to critique, especially when they were so close to my heart. It was me acknowledging and accepting Paxton for who he was. He had a right to feel abandoned and not handle loss well. Hopefully, with me in his life, he would come to realize he didn't need to do it on his own anymore, that our relationship wasn't just me taking and drawing strength from him.

"Thank you." I tried to return her smile.

"Almost," Anya stated with a small smile around her lips.

"Almost?" I deflated.

This was why some of my choreography and dancing were my therapy, so to speak. I didn't want to feel less-than. It was my way to work out my emotions. I compared it to crying or laughing and someone telling you you were doing it wrong.

"Yes, almost." Anya's eyes twinkled. "Let's start at the top."

I wanted to deny her and tell her it was me "fooling" around, but I could discern that excuse wouldn't fly. There was a determination in her eyes. Anya had a way of inspiring people and convincing people to bend to her will. I knew it was fruitless to argue or protest.

I nodded and hit play on my phone once more. As I went through my number again, I noticed Anya mimicking my steps. She stopped the music.

"Here. Here you should add a triple leg hold turn," she instructed.

I did as she instructed, raising my hand and arm. I extended my leg over my head and grabbed it. I could feel my muscles straining and immediately recognized that my flexibility wasn't where it had

been. I had religiously stretched once I began feeling better, but I still wasn't a hundred percent. My leg extension was better than most but not my personal best, and for a split second, I felt frustrated.

"Get out of your head," Anya barked out. "Again." She backed up the music.

I nodded. Some people hated to be pushed and scolded, but I thrived on it. Honestly, I was happy she wasn't treating me like broken glass. It hindered me more than it helped, most of the time.

Some of my teachers and Starr and Alex were overprotective in too many ways. I wasn't the only one to notice Starr and Alex urging us to take more breaks during our group rehearsal. I both appreciated and resented their concern.

I didn't need Bailey's and Wendy's snide remarks. I woke up this morning determined to reclaim my life. I resolved to "stay out of my head," and focus on the positivity and ignore the negativity and doubts crowding my thoughts.

The music started once more, and I took a deep, calming breath. I reminded myself of who I was dancing for and why. I pushed my body when it wanted to rest. I took Anya's words to heart and executed the moves she added to my dance. By the time she was pleased with my number, I felt a bone-deep satisfaction.

"Good, good." Anya clapped. "Now go to school. I will see you after school, yeah?"

I nodded and smiled.

Today was going to be a good day. I hoped.

●

"Hi, Peyton, my name is Enzo," the man standing beside Sal introduced himself.

The man wasn't anything remarkable to look at. He was average looking in height and looks. Honestly, if I were to see him in a crowd, I would never peg him for protective detail. I knew being fit wasn't necessarily a security requirement; however, Enzo had a slight paunch to his middle.

"Hi, Enzo." I nodded at him.

I didn't know what it was about Enzo, but I got weird vibes from him immediately. He seemed too preoccupied with looking at me. It wasn't a typical inspection, either.

“Peyton?” Sal seemed to hesitate before leaving with Renee.

I didn’t want to admit my feelings about the bad vibes I was picking up. I knew as soon as Sal dropped off Renee he was picking his children up to spend the evening with them, and I didn’t want to ruin his plans. I knew how vital seeing his children were.

“Have a great afternoon,” I said instead, feigning a smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Enjoy your children.”

We had taken the same route as yesterday, and it was exceptionally bright as we exited the building. I was digging into my bag, looking for my sunglasses, when I heard a vaguely familiar female voice.

“Peyton?”

I looked up, fully intending to pull my hood up and hide from the media. I barely stopped myself from glaring at Enzo. It was his job to make sure no one could get to me.

I speed walked towards our waiting vehicle.

“Peyton!” I heard my name yelled once more.

Before I climbed into the SUV, I looked up and was shocked into incapacitation. I blinked rapidly. I knew she was attempting to reach out to me, but the shock of seeing her left me paralyzed.

The woman who advanced toward me was my mother; Priscilla, but not. The last time I’d seen her, she hadn’t looked like a thirty-four-year-old woman and her appearance had reflected the hard life she’d left. Back then, she looked older and more worn down. She had never bothered with her looks or clothing. However, things had drastically changed in her absence.

She was wearing a chic red pantsuit with a fitted black shirt peeking out of the lapels. Her hair wasn’t a dull dishwater blonde any longer, but vibrant and several shades blonder than usual. Her makeup was expertly applied, making her blue eyes− her best feature− pop out.

I was speechless.

With her new look, she looked years’ younger. She didn’t look old enough to be my mother; she looked like she could be a slightly older sister instead.

“My beautiful girl,” she gushed once she was within five feet from me.

I held up my hand, finally snapping out of my daze. “That’s close enough, and I’m not your beautiful girl,” I said dryly. “You left me with your abusive husband.”

A look of hurt crossed her features before a smooth smile replaced it. “I’m sorry, Peyton. I knew Sean had one foot out the door. It was only a matter of time before he’d feel claustrophobic from this tiny town and left. You weren’t in any danger. Plus, I needed to work on myself. I couldn’t be the mother I needed to be to you if I was lacking. I wasn’t happy, and I was depressed. I needed to find me again.”

I coldly looked at her expensive stilettos, taking in her new look once more. “You left me with a man that abused me,” I hissed out in disgust. “He may have split, but not before he made sure to hurt me again. You needed to work on *you*,” I sneered, “without me. Your daughter.” She winced, understanding where she stood with me. “No, Priscilla.”

I had resorted to calling Sean by his first name once I lost all respect for him, so my delivery now should’ve been loud and clear to her.

“You didn’t just want to work on you,” I continued. “You found a new man.” She blanched. “Yes, I heard all about him,” I rushed out. “It sounds like he’s another low-life, too.”

She looked away and didn’t even try to refute my claims.

“I heard he’s a drug and gun runner,” I went on. “Does he have you running for him, too?”

I knew her new boyfriend had ties with Kyler’s and Crew's dad. I knew their father ran drugs and illegal guns before he skipped town. I shouldn’t have been so shocked and disappointed that my mother jumped from the pan into the fire. I had loved her, but I knew she had low ambitions. She had been content serving tables her whole life−not that there was anything wrong with that−but I knew before her parents kicked her out she had ambitions. She had dreams. As a little girl, I had tried to encourage her to chase those dreams. She never found the courage to, though.

Now she was in another situation that she should have avoided. Only this time, I wasn’t going to sacrifice my happiness and safety for her. I couldn’t. She had already taken enough from me.

“No,” she emphatically exclaimed, but I knew deep down she was lying. “Walter loves me and takes care of me. I’m sorry I made a mistake. I should have never left you, but I didn’t know where I was going. I didn’t want to drag you to a new home after you just got here. Sean was going to kill me… I’m sorry I didn’t protect you.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes.

Why was she doing this now? I had just gotten control of my life once more and she comes waltzing back in.

“Well, Sean almost killed *me*, Priscilla, twice,” I reminded her. “And I know all about Walter. I know he’s no good. I’m well aware of how he gets his money. Who are you trying to kid here? You were always so delusional where men were concerned. They always mattered more than I ever did.”

She blanched once more, but I felt nothing. That feeling I once had for her is gone. The ache in my chest where she is concerned no longer exists. A void had replaced the pain. A vacuum I didn’t want or need her to repair.

“Walter’s a good man,” she insisted. “He wants to meet you. He’ll be a better step-father. We have a room for you at the house. I miss you. I want to see you again. I want to rebuild our relationship. You can move in with us. I want to show you that I can be a better mom to you. And Walter will never raise a hand to you.”

“It’s a little late for that, isn’t it, Priscilla?” I said snidely before readjusting my bag on my shoulders. “I have no desire to meet Walter or any other man that manages to twist you up. I have a home—several, in fact. I don’t want or need anything from you or your loathsome man. So… just please, leave me alone and don’t send any other thugs my way.”

“You need to tell the police that you made a mistake,” she blurted out. “That you knew the guys that got arrested.”

I let out a harsh laugh. That’s exactly why she had visited today.

I throw my head back, trying to stifle the tears that threatened to spill. She didn’t deserve my time or tears.

“And so the real reason you came to visit me emerges.” I turned cold eyes on her. “Nope. I’m not sure what your end game is or why you sent those men to ‘talk’ to me, but I don’t care. I’m done.

You abandoned me and didn't give a damn what happened to me. Why should I care about what you want me to do? I don't."

I was about to enter the car but then stopped. She looked frightened and horrified, but it felt like I was made of ice.

"Why should I want to do anything for you? Where were you?" I demanded. "Where were you when Sean hurt me? Where were you when I was taken? My grandfather, my biological father, and my new friends were there, and I just met them. They headed *search parties*, Priscilla. They worked around the clock, helping and hoping for my return. When they finally tracked you down, you didn't even have a picture of me to give them. You knew I was kidnapped, and you couldn't leave your new man long enough to pretend to care about my return? Right. Have a good life, Priscilla."

I jumped in the car and slammed the door. My breathing was rapid as I clenched and unclenched my fist. Angry tears clouded my eyes.

"Don't ever let that woman near me ever again," I said to Enzo between clenched teeth.

I wanted to yell at him for even allowing her to get close to me to begin with. However, I knew it wasn't fair for me to take out my frustrations on him. She had looked harmless enough.

The entire ride to school was a silent one.

●

"What's wrong?" Golden asked the moment he saw me.

I was barely out of my seat when he ran out the door and enfolded me into his arms. I felt the somewhat tenuous hold I had on my feelings in danger of shattering.

"What the hell happened, man?" I heard Crew growl out as I buried my head in Golden's chest.

I took strength in Golden's embrace. I tried to relax in his touch. His lips were on the top of my head as he whispered reassuring words. His fingers trailed my spine soothingly.

"Priscilla came to visit her," Enzo said with a slight attitude.

I felt my spine stiffen and knew almost immediately he could never be one of my Shadows. I already had a bad feeling about him, and his defensive behavior only solidified my initial impression. The

moment I got a chance, I was texting Grandpa to let him know he wouldn't work.

"Her mom," Crew growled. "And where were you?"

"Watching her, and I don't answer to you," Enzo said in a nearly bored tone.

Crew snorted. "You keep thinking that, buddy." He stepped forward so that he was toe to toe with the shorter, smaller man. "Why would you allow that woman anywhere near her?" he snarled.

"It's her mother." Enzo was still belligerent, but I saw the fear in his eyes. "I didn't see her as a threat."

I was more upset at Enzo for not stepping in at all. He never even tried to get her away when it was apparent her presence had upset me.

I saw Crew's jaw clenched in anger. His fists were clenching and unclenching with thin restraint. His nostrils flared with each breath he took. I knew he was dangerously close to hitting Enzo.

"It doesn't matter," I finally muttered.

I reached out and gently ran my hands up and down Crew's back, up to his neck and back down again. I couldn't tolerate him getting into an altercation on school property. He had a huge game this Friday to consider. He needed to play in every game; he couldn't be expelled or benched for any reason. There would be returning college football scouts, and his future was on the line. I wasn't going to let him ruin it over an incompetent fool.

"I'm starving. Can we eat? Please feed me, Crew," I insisted.

My stomach really didn't want to eat, but logically I knew I needed to. This week was an important one. I needed to get stronger and fuel my body correctly. My future was also on the line.

Crew looked down at me, and I could see the war in his eyes. I tried to convey to him that Enzo wouldn't be with us for much longer.

I knew he was fiercely protective of me. He didn't want me hurt mentally, emotionally, and physically. I had to get him out of the red zone.

"Please?" I stood on my tiptoes and kissed the underside of his jaw.

“Let’s go, angel,” he muttered, grabbing my hand, with Golden still holding the other, and led me towards the school.

We made our way inside just as the bell was ringing. I flinched slightly, and Golden tightened his arm around me. I didn’t even bother seeing if Enzo was following.

The classroom ahead of us was flung open and Madison came out laughing with a couple of the football players. I immediately stuttered to a stop, hoping she didn’t see me. My emotions were already running so high. I didn’t need any more drama.

Once again, I felt oddly detached from someone who once meant so much to me. It was like I was looking at another life. A life I no longer connected with.

Her head turned slightly, and her laughter died. She stopped and placed herself in the middle of the hallway.

“Hey, Peyton. Hey, Goldie.” She gnawed on her bottom lip, and I inwardly cringed. It was her coy, pleading look. “Have you guys decided when Golden and I can meet up to do our Spanish project?”

“I already told you, Madison.” Golden sighed. “I’m going to tell Ms. Rosa that I can’t work with you. My loyalty lies with Peyton, and I can’t put myself in a position where she doubts my feelings or intentions ever again.”

Tears brimmed her eyes. I wasn’t sure if they were real or fake.

Once upon a time, I loved Madison, but I knew she could be very single-minded. I had admired that about her in the past. However, I wouldn’t, and *couldn’t*, be manipulated by her ability to turn on the waterworks.

“I already apologized, Peyton,” Madison cried. “I’m sorry. I promise I’m not after Golden. It was a mistake. I miss you. I miss *us.* I can’t afford to take a zero on this project. Ms. Rosa already told us we couldn’t switch partners. If we don’t do this, I will fail Spanish, and then I won’t be able to cheer and my partial scholarship will be in jeopardy.”

I looked up at Golden as the reality of the situation sunk in. Golden already walked a thin line. He couldn’t fail any significant projects or subjects, either. My disappearance and his own guilt had wrecked him, so he had already missed a lot of days.

Mr. Fanning was sympathetic to the situation and understood his absence, but he could only do so much. Golden needed to pass all his classes.

“I don’t care,” he murmured in my ear as if he understood the war within.

“Sunday,” I finally agreed. “I trust you.” I looked pointedly at him, then back to Madison. “You can come over to our house around three.”

“Thank you, Peyton, thank you,” Madison gushed.

I embraced the cold within once more. “It’s not for you, Madison,” I explained coldly. “Golden needs to pass all his classes. And,” I added, “don’t even attempt suggesting going upstairs. You can do your project in the dining room.”

I knew how Madison worked. Even if she really didn’t want Golden anymore, I still didn’t trust her. I knew her history, how most of her study sessions or projects ended with a hookup.

She looked momentarily upset but stuck her hands in her pockets and nodded. “Understood,” she murmured.

The second bell rang as she walked away.

14

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Hoodwinked

“So, your mom just showed up?” Zane’s brows knitted together in concern.

“Yup.” I nodded as I dipped my baked chicken into some hot sauce. “She tried to pretend that she was concerned about me and missed me. Then when I told her I was through with her, she tried to convince me to go to the police, recant our statement, and get those guys out of jail.”

It was lunch hour. My chicken was a bit dry today, and the lettuce on my salad looked questionable. Tomorrow I had to remember to order lunch for us. The lunch selection was dismal today. I knew the guys missed lunch off-campus as well.

“Why would she want you to do that?” Paxton asked. He placed a hand on my thigh and squeezed. He was always affectionate, but today, he was overly affectionate. We shared a few secret smiles, and it helped me get my mind off of Priscilla and the fact that Madison would be at our house on Sunday.

“I think they’re runners.” I looked over at Crew cautiously.

Crew still seemed to be upset over Enzo’s incompetence. I was also sure that knowing how his father’s business has managed to interfere in my life had him on edge, too. He had rejected that life.

Jana, his ex, was still embroiled in it. She tried to convince Crew that he should embrace the shady but profitable life, but he had steadfastly refused. He had helped bail her out of a tricky situation a few times and hated every minute of it.

I stared at him for a few moments as he tucked his food away. I didn’t want to talk about my mom for that very reason, but Golden was insistent on finding out what happened.

I could only imagine what kind of man Crew would be today if he were still with Jana. For a little while, they had been expecting a

child. Would he have been able to separate himself from that life if she was involved in it?

"They found some new contacts," Crew finally said, his voice raspy. "The busier they are, the more people they need running. Having some of them in lock-up is probably hurting business."

"How do you know that?" Golden inquired.

Crew exhaled loudly before running a large hand through his shoulder-length tresses. He lifted a massive shoulder. "I still hear things," he grumbled.

"How?" I asked as I stabbed an underripe tomato. I grimaced at its hard, bitter taste. I liked my tomatoes ripe and soft-ish. Cherry tomatoes should never be crunchy.

"I overheard Jana." Crew leaned over the table and tucked my hair behind my ear. He gave me an apologetic look. "My dad's back," he explained with another casual shrug of his shoulder.

I could tell I wasn't the only one stunned by this news. Zane, Golden, Paxton, and I exchanged glances. Crew and Zane were the closest out of the four of them, so I was surprised this disclosure seemed to have astonished him as well.

I could tell Crew was more upset by this than he'd conveyed by his actions and words.

I knew I had a lot on my plate lately, but I wished Crew would have told me about this sooner. I could tell how conflicted he was with this rumor. His dad had left him and Kyler to fend for themselves after hearing the ATF and FBI were closing in on his operations. It had been years since he'd shown up in these parts.

Rumor had it that a few of the big guys had been taken down, but somehow operations had continued. Kyler and Crew had always suspected that their dad still pulled strings behind the scenes in some undisclosed location.

I got up and, without a thought, perched myself in Crew's lap. "Do you know this for sure?"

My physical touch seemed to calm him the most; words were never a strong communication technique between us as much as touch.

He wrapped his arm around my waist and readjusted me to a more comfortable position. He gently rubbed my back as if I needed

comforting. With his free hand, he leaned forward and tore a piece of chicken off the leg quarter, dipped it in hot sauce, and placed it against my lips.

I opened my mouth, knowing he wouldn't talk unless he knew I was eating and was taken care of. I impishly sucked his finger into my mouth, and he grunted, his eyes darkening in desire.

"Do you know this for sure?" Golden inquired with amusement in his voice.

"I'm sure Jana staged her conversation near my lockers on purpose yesterday afternoon," Crew grunted. "She's been making herself a nuisance lately. I should have told you, angel" He placed a hand on my cheek.

"Nuisance how?" I inquired as I leaned in to kiss his cheek.

Jana had tried to discourage me from hanging around Crew at first, but I thought she had gotten over him. She was known to be with a few guys that ran the drugs and guns. They were older, and with her looks, she didn't lack male attention.

Honestly, she was a bombshell. I felt like a little girl beside her. She was tall, beautiful, and exotic-looking. She was sexy and drew men's attention without really trying.

"She asked me to come hang out with her a few times. She wanted my new number. She tried to convince me that the money was good right now if I wanted to 'help' them out. Stuff like that," he said almost sheepishly.

I nodded. Oddly, I wasn't that upset. Crew had a history with Jana, but I knew he never even gave her a second glance. After I caught them in the diner together, he understood where I stood with them. I didn't expect her to stop trying to manipulate him, and I already predicted she would continue to try. However, I trusted Crew implicitly. I knew he would inform me when he felt he needed to.

"She kept on saying Butch's name to some of her lackeys yesterday," he continued. "I knew she was trying to get a reaction from me. She wouldn't be dropping his name unless she needed or wanted to. Plus," he exhaled once more, "it explains a lot of things I've been noticing lately. It's as if Jana's recruiting and she wouldn't be unless someone told her to. She's a greedy bitch. The more people that are distributing in an area, the more ways the money will

be split. Unless she thinks she won't lose out on her profit, she wouldn't be searching for help. Recreational drugs have always circulated our halls, but lately…?" He shrugged as his voice trailed off.

"You think they're going to introduce something harder here?" Zane concluded grimly.

Crew stiltedly nodded.

"Have you gone to anyone?" I asked in concern.

Crew leaned over and took a bite of his food before dipping another piece of chicken for me. "I planned to talk to Lochlann about it today. I remember watching Butch growing up. I know how he operates when he decides to dabble in a new product. If Jana's on board, then it's bound to be beyond the pot she's been pushing."

"Priscilla looked really good, too," I added. "I don't remember her ever looking that beautiful and put together. She looked like a businesswoman or a pampered housewife."

My experience with drug dealers was limited to television and my previous high school. All the drug dealers I knew looked and acted like thugs.

"They groomed and trained her," Crew grunted with a frown. "If a beautiful middle-aged woman was traveling with a large SUV, she's less likely to get pulled over or suspected of criminal activity. They are using her looks for their benefit. That's why Jana can get away with a lot. She's…" his voice trailed off, and Paxton and Golden chortled with laughter.

"She's what?" Golden ribbed him.

"Hot?" I rolled my eyes before sticking my tongue out at the guys. "We all know she's hot."

"Not as hot as you," Paxton protested.

"Whatever." I goodnaturedly rolled my eyes once more.

I knew I wasn't physically appealing, and I was aware that the guys found me attractive. However, I wasn't delusional. She was hands down one of the most attractive females I had ever met.

But I knew what was inside a person mattered to the guys, as it did me. Jana's black soul would never attract them to her, especially after what she did to Crew.

I shook my head before grabbing my can of Cherry Dr. Pepper and took a sip before adding, “Jana’s look doesn’t draw the attention others may,” I surmised, “just like Priscilla. It’s smart, I admit. Mom really knows how to pick ‘em, too. She tried to convince me that she and Walter had a beautiful room waiting for me. She thinks I should move in with them and rebuild our relationship. She wants to make it up to me. She promised that Walter wouldn’t raise a hand towards me.”

Crew immediately stiffened. “She what?” he asked in a deadly quiet voice.

“She wanted me to move in with her and get to know Walter. She wanted to work on our relationship.” I frowned at the thunder rolling in his eyes.

“Tell Grandpa Delaney to get rid of that fucker.” Crew pointed towards the far corner of the courtyard.

Enzo was standing against the wall, looking at his phone. I didn’t expect him to be watching me. In fact, I preferred that he didn’t. However, his lackadaisical attitude grated on my nerves.

“And if you see Priscilla ever again, go the other way,” Crew added.

My frown deepened. “I already planned to tell Grandpa that Enzo won’t work, and I don’t ever want to see Priscilla ever again. Do you think she had plans for me? She didn’t just want to convince me to only talk to the police on their behalf?”

A sick feeling settled at the bottom of my stomach. I was just recovering from the last assholes that traumatized me. Now it would appear Priscilla was more than willing to put me in danger yet again. My lunch roiled in my stomach, and fear gripped me.

Crew cradled my face and placed his forehead against mine. “You’re beautiful, angel. They could easily use you somewhere. If they thought you would work for them, there’s no doubt in my mind that you could and would bring in a lot of money for them.”

I closed my eyes and inwardly cursed my mother. Why had she chosen to keep me if her lifelong mission was only to hurt me?

The bell rang, and I reluctantly stood.

“Come on, beautiful. I’ll take you to class,” Zane beckoned me with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes and stretched out his hand.

“We’ll pick you up after dance tonight.” Crew cast a glare in Enzo’s oblivious direction. “We can all go to Grandpa Delaney’s together.”

“Do you think the football team and cheerleaders will mind extra hands?” Golden inquired.

He hadn’t been able to go last night due to two crucial exams today he’d had to study for. Some of his teachers allowed him to make up the work he had missed. Others hadn’t. It was important that he excelled in those classes and passed his exams. From what he told us before we started talking about Priscilla, he was confident he had aced them.

“We have to pick up the kids tonight,” Paxton reminded him. “Lochlann has that staff meeting, and Kyler already warned us he was working on his flips out of town.”

Golden’s face fell. I could tell he wanted to spend more time with me. Now that we were back in school, we had to figure out a way to balance our time together again.

“We can pick them up and then head out together,” Paxton suggested. “Maisie wants to see Grandpa Delaney, and maybe it’s time the children were introduced to each other.”

I nodded. “That’s a good idea. David already told us he’d be feeding us all week, and if the kids are going to be around for the foreseeable future, might as well get it over with.”

I still struggled with seeing the kids, but after a few of them “visited” me last night, I couldn’t hold my grudge against Ava, couldn’t let it affect my feelings towards them. They were all good children and desperately needed the socialization they hadn’t received at the cabin in the woods.

“Okay,” Golden said with a broad smile. “I’ll see you in English.” He kissed my cheek and headed off to his next class.

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” Paxton murmured in my ear.

I felt my face redden. “Ditto,” I admitted.

Paxton gave me a vast, satisfied smile before he kissed my forehead and strolled off.

The second bell rang just then, breaking me from my lust-filled daze, and I hurried off to math class.

●

“Peyton, can I see you for a moment?” Mr. Hutchins, my Calculus teacher, asked as the bell rang.

Zane cast me a curious look, and I shrugged in confusion. I had no clue what he would want to talk to me about.

I reached down for my bag and tried to avoid the other curious gazes sent my way. Day two of my return to school was going much better than day one. I figured the novelty of my arrival was starting to wear off. Most of them seemed to empathize with my situation and probably realized their stares and whispers weren’t necessary. Only a handful of people seemed to want to dissect me further.

I stood, and Zane immediately took my bag from me. He carried it for me to all my classes, despite my protest. It was clear, though, when I reached the front of the room that Mr. Hutchins wouldn’t speak to me in front of Zane.

I heard Zane sigh. “I’ll be right outside, Peyton,” he murmured.

I nodded and smiled as he stepped out the door, then I looked at Mr. Hutchins. “Yes, sir?” I inquired.

“How are you doing?” he asked without preamble.

“Good,” I said concisely.

My distrust of “strange” men had grown since my abduction. Coach Carson had been an unassuming male role model in our community. I had to admit he had helped hundreds of young men. He had left a legacy through his mentoring and genuine care.

No one would have suspected that he was capable of kidnapping and child molestation. Some were still in shock that he was involved with Claire's and my abduction. Even if Claire had been willing, it was still rape. She was just a child.

I didn’t know if I could ever trust a strange male ever again because of Principal Boyd’s and Coach Carson’s behavior. Sure, Mr. Hutchins seemed nice before my abduction. He never gave me the creeps. I also knew he had helped in the call center after school with his wife and older son. However, I was forever damaged after finding out all the good that Coach had done before Claire and I were abducted.

“Good.” He gave me a slight nod. “I’m sorry if I’m making you feel uncomfortable,” he said shrewdly, retreating several steps back. I visibly relaxed slightly. “I just wanted to see how you were doing

and ask you if you would like to make up some of your quizzes in my presence or your counselors? I have a free period during your lunch, or we can arrange a more convenient time with Mrs. White."

I had been able to make up a lot of my work during my convalescence. However, both Mrs. Baker, my English Literature teacher, and Mr. Hutchins advised me that all tests and quizzes would have to be completed on my return.

I looked towards the classroom door, then back at him. I didn't like the hold Coach Carson still had on me, but I also realized that I had to take baby steps with some things.

"Can I do it with Mrs. White?" I finally inquired. I cleared my throat, realizing my throat was too dry.

He nodded with understanding. "Absolutely. I'll let Mrs. White know to expect you. Can you drop in to see her sometime today?"

"I can, thank you."

I turned to walk a few steps when he said, "Peyton, I'm glad you're back."

There was a sheen of tears in his eyes. I was confused by them for a second. "Thank you," I responded awkwardly, opening the door.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Zane right outside, no sign of Enzo. I shook my head. I should text Grandpa soon.

"Everything okay?" Zane asked.

I nodded. "Mr. Hutchins just wanted to see how I wanted to make-up my quizzes and the test. He gave me the option of having him watch me, or if I rather it be with Mrs. White."

Zane pulled me into the curve of the body as we weaved in and out of the crowded hallway. "And?" he gently prodded.

"And I can't sit in a room alone with a man I don't know," I admitted quietly, looking up at him.

He closed his eyes briefly and kissed the top of my head. "No one blames you, Peyton," he said near my ear.

I nodded with a jerk of my head. "I hate the hold they still have on me," I admitted as my voice broke in anger and desolation.

"It won't always be like this," Zane reassured me in a soothing voice. "Some obstacles may seem huge, but you'll always have us

by your side, cheering you on and knowing you can and *will* beat them."

I smiled at his kind words and stood on my tiptoes to graze his jawline with my lips. "Thank you."

There was a considerable commotion up ahead, and I realized there must be a fight. A large circle of people were surrounding two guys in the middle, which struck me as slightly odd. My last school was huge, and a fight was expected on a daily basis.

Since I started here, I had only witnessed or heard of two fights. Almost everyone seemed to keep their physical altercations off of school grounds. I wouldn't even call the first one a skirmish. It had been just Dylan and some of his meatheaded friends bullying Raymond, a younger freshman. The second one involved Dylan and Leah when they had their buddy tackle me, and Crew had attacked him in my defense.

Zane tried to skirt us around the growing crowd, and I could feel bodies begin to bump into me. My anxiety rose, panic swimming in my chest. I gripped Zane's hand tightly, digging my nails into his hand.

I saw his eyes widen in understanding. The crowd surged back as some of the teachers attempted to jump in to intervene. All of a sudden, my hand was forcefully ripped out of Zane's tight grasp. I let out a cry of distress as I heard Zane yell my name.

I watched as people separated Zane further from me. I tried to make my way back to him. I could see him wildly swinging at people to make his way towards me.

The alarm truly set in as someone stepped on my foot, and a pair of strong hands grabbed me from behind. I threw an elbow and kicked back, but the person barely moved. I realized in a growing panic that another pair of arms was now tightening around my waist. Other hands grabbed my feet. I felt five pairs of hands and arms in total surrounding me and attempting to carry me off.

"Help!" I screamed as shrill alarms sounded above.

The fire alarms were resounding in my head, and bright lights flashed on the stark white wall. I realized the group of people that had lifted me was heading in the opposite direction of the fight and crowded hallway.

The crowd surged and chaos ensued.

I attempted to throw my head back to head butt the person behind me, but my hair was brutally yanked back.

“Knock it off, bitch,” an unrecognizable voice growled.

“Put her in here,” a vaguely familiar feminine voice ordered.

A hood was thrown over my head as I continued to scream. I knew it was pointless. My voice was still recovering, so it was hoarse anyway, and with the shouting from the crowd and fire alarms, no one would hear me. Why didn’t anyone see me getting carried away?

What did these people want? Was Tormentor back? Did Priscilla and her boy toy put someone up to this?

I was roughly thrown forward. I tripped over my own feet but managed to catch myself before crashing to the floor. Blood filled my mouth as I bit the inside of my cheek.

The pain in my mouth momentarily distracted me. That was until I felt hands grab my arms and legs again. I screamed and thrashed against my captors, but it came out as a squeak through my raw vocal cords. I felt a sharp sting at my hip before I felt the cold air hit my body.

I shuddered, thrashed, and attempted to scream again as I realized whoever had captured me was removing my clothing. The wet warmth trailing down my hip was a clear indication that I had been cut.

The pain in my chest intensified. My breathing became shallow. Total terror and anxiety nearly paralyzed me.

Why? *Why me!* What had I done to deserve the treatment I continually received?

I felt someone push me forward, and out of pure reflex I extended my hands to prevent my face from meeting the ground. I let out an inarticulate sound as someone kneeled on the small of my back. They gripped the ends of my hair from the hood and yanked my head back. I gasped and hoarsely screamed out in pain. A peal of cruel feminine laughter filled my ears.

“This should teach you to stay away from things that aren’t yours,” the girl hissed in my ear. “Butch needs his men released, and he wants his boys back. I want my *man* back. Leave Crew and Kyler

alone, and we'll leave you alone. And don't think for one moment to run to the cops. Look how easy it was for us to get to you in a hallway full of people. Imagine how easy it'll be if we decided to pick up those snot-nosed brats? Do you know who we have working for us can easily walk away with either one of them and no one would bat an eye? Would you want them to suffer for your mistakes?"

My body was frozen in shock. My flight or fight instincts seemed to be completely shut off as my panic rose. What little light I could see through the hood was extinguished as a door slammed shut.

Memories of another time I was shoved in darkness infiltrated my fragile mind. I immediately surmised that I was in a janitor's closet. The smell of pungent cleaning supplies invaded my nose. The sound of a leaking faucet pervaded my ears. The tightness in my chest increased. Soon I was I gasping for my next breath. All the research I did to help my panic attacks eluded me. My vision faded to darkness as I lost another battle.

●

I heard Lochlann's voice in the distance. "Peyton, breathe for me, love, breathe,"

"Here," I heard Zane's voice filled with pain and guilt, "Put this on her."

Uncontrolled spasms seized my body, and I felt like I had been immersed in ice-cold water. My teeth gnashed together audibly, and I jerked in the warm arms that engulfed me.

"Who the fuck did this to her?" I heard Golden growl.

I felt warm hands caress my body as something was placed over my head, and my arms were slipped into a long-sleeved shirt. I caught a whiff of Zane's cologne and realized that one of his shirts had been placed on me.

"The cops and ambulance are on the way," Principal Fanning reported grimly somewhere nearby.

I cringed, hoping he hadn't seen me naked.

Where were we?

My eyes snapped open, and I was met with concerned electric blue eyes behind wired-rimmed glasses. I wildly looked around and was relieved to find Mr. Fanning wasn't in the small

room. I could only see Lochlann, Crew, Golden, Paxton, and Crew, even though the door was open, leading out into the hallway.

I tried to crawl into Lochlann's lap as Zane crouched down beside us.

"If you hold her up, I'll help you slide this on her," Zane said, grimly holding up a pair of sweatpants. "I'm so sorry, beautiful. I shouldn't have let them pull you away from me."

I tried to answer him, but my voice was raw. I couldn't tell him I didn't blame him. I couldn't tell him that we'd been hoodwinked and had been a setup. Startling clarity slammed into me as I realized who the feminine voice belonged to.

Jana.

Understanding dawned on me as I realized why I had been accosted, pushed into a closet, and stripped bare.

It was evident that Jana had been the mastermind behind the intimidation tactic. I was sure she got her orders from Butch and was only too happy to execute them. Butch really wanted his men released from jail and maybe even wanted his sons to follow in the "family" business.

After Crew's revelation, it was apparent that Jana was eager to be his girlfriend again. According to Crew, she always had a crush on him. He had entertained her and even began a relationship with her. Out of a sense of guilt and obligation when her father took the fall for his father, he believed he should give her pursuits an attempt.

He had even convinced himself he had cared for her. But her decision to get rid of the baby and her determination to follow in their father's footsteps had been unforgivable to him. Crew didn't want to be with a person that was so enamored with "the life," one that had made his own mother abandon them, leaving his father with no warning.

He'd seen the money his father used to make. He'd witnessed the ugly side of that business. He chose to separate himself from that life. She wouldn't or couldn't understand that. It was abundantly apparent that Crew wanted no part of that type of life, no matter how hard she tried to convince him otherwise.

My mind was processing everything as Lochlann pulled me in closer. The feeling in my legs and arms seemed to have slowly

returned. The tremors had subsided. I wasted no time climbing into his lap and winding my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck. I leaned my head against his chest, seeking out the steady thump of his heart.

I needed him to ground me. I needed to have my wits about me as I decided on my next course of action. I didn't know if I should tell the cops what I knew about my attackers. I was uncertain if I should tell Kyler the warning that had been delivered to me. My mind was spinning in circles, and as indecision warred in my mind, I felt the panic return.

"Where the fuck were you?" Crew growled out before I heard something slam into the lockers in the hall.

I jumped and looked over my shoulder. I saw Enzo pinned to the lockers as Crew held a muscular forearm across his neck. The older, smaller man struggled against his hold, but it was futile. He didn't have the weight or strength Crew had. He also didn't have wrath pouring through his veins as Crew did.

I already knew Crew would kill anyone on my behalf. Enzo was walking on thin ice after allowing Priscilla so close to me, and Crew already determined he would never trust the man to watch over me. Now this.

"Mr. Fairchild," Mr. Fanning called in a warning.

"Chill, man, chill," I heard Paxton coax Crew.

A weird, garbled noise emerged from my throat in distress. I hated Enzo, and I already knew he was gone after his latest neglect. However, I didn't want Crew to get in trouble on my behalf. His future wasn't worth Enzo's meaningless existence. Enzo already had his punishment coming towards him.

It took Paxton, Golden, and Zane to wrestle Crew from Enzo, who had been turning an alarming shade of red as Crew nearly choked the life out of him. Enzo fell to his knees, gasping for breath.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't see that," Mr. Fanning said between clenched teeth. "Pull another stunt like that, Mr. Fairchild, and your ass will be sitting on the bench for the rest of the season."

Crew's chest noticeably rose with controlled fury, but he gave a short nod of acknowledgment.

“Excuse me!” I heard a scuffling of feet as I saw two paramedics arrive with a stretcher.

“No,” I finally spoke gutturally. “Fine.”

My throat was raw, my head hurt, my back stung, and I knew there would be bruises on my knees, but I didn’t want to go to the hospital. In fact, I had been poked and prodded enough to last a lifetime. I had grown a vast aversion to hospitals.

“You need to be checked out,” Lochlann insisted as he cradled my face.

I frantically shook my head. I didn’t want to get checked out. I wanted to finish the rest of the school day. I needed to lose myself in cheer and dance as I decided what my next course of action was. I needed to make some decisions, and I didn’t know how to approach them.

“Peyton, love,” Lochlann murmured. “You have a bruise on your forehead, and you have a shallow cut on your back. You need to see how serious it was.”

“I called Grandpa Delaney,” Zane spoke up. “He said to take her to the house, and he’ll send Dr. Baylor.”

I shook my head obstinately.

“Peyton, you are going with these people or home,” Lochlann said firmly. “We need to make sure you’re okay.”

I looked at all the guys. I could see I had worried them. Again.

I sagged in defeat. I had to consider the guys’ feelings. Yes, I was stubborn enough to try to power through the pain, but I knew they wouldn’t feel at peace with my decision until I was seen.

And if I had to be seen, Bryce would be my best option. Dr. Bryce Baylor was someone I trusted implicitly. If anyone was going to see if I was physically okay, he was the only one I would want near me. His presence was oddly calming, and he was brilliant.

“Home,” I rasped.

“Lochlann?” Mr. Fanning said as Lochlann stood with me still in his arms.

Lochlann looked up at him and then down at me. “I’m taking the rest of the day off, Steve.”

“Lochlann—” Mr. Fanning prodded.

Lochlann shook his head. “Not right now, Steve. We’ll talk later. Peyton is family and right now my family needs me.”

With that, he strode out of the closet room while I leaned into him. I hoped he hadn’t just jeopardized his career, but I was happy he was making a stand for us.

15

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Enter Player 2 and 3

“Do you have any clue who may have attacked you?” Officer Pope asked as he took a seat at the dining room table.

Dr. Baylor had just left and reassured the guys that I was physically okay. I had the shallow cut on my hip and slight bruising on my wrist from where I had tried to prevent a face-plant, but everything else was fine. I told Bryce about my issue with not being able to scream earlier but he said it was to be expected. He informed me that with my vocal chords still healing I would have my good days and bad days. Stress could also be a major factor in how they operated, he’d said. Before he left, he had once again handed me business cards for a few therapists and “strongly” suggested that I talk to one of them.

I picked up my hot tea with lemon and honey and took a sip of it. “No, sir.” I shook my head.

I had to lie. I couldn’t tell Officer Pope the truth; I had to talk to Kyler and Lochlann first. As Bryce examined me, I determined that I had to inform the guys, at least a few of them. They were the oldest, and I hoped they would have a suggestion on how I should proceed.

I wanted to protect the kids, but there was no way I was leaving Kyler and Crew− not that they would let me. I was relatively sure Crew hadn’t told his brother about Butch, which I wish he had done. Now that Butch planned to reel his sons back in, it was pertinent Kyler found out soon rather than later. When the time was right, I would inform the others.

I knew I couldn’t tell Crew right now. He was already in the red zone. Golden was just as vindictive and ruthless, and I could envision him going after Jana and her gang. Zane was still carrying

around guilt for allowing me to be carried away. And Paxton wasn't in the right emotional state just yet.

"You didn't see them?" Officer Pope asked as his eyebrows knitted together.

I shook my head as Paxton brought over a snack tray of deli meat, cheese, and crackers.

"They grabbed me from behind," I explained past a dry throat. I took another sip of my drink. "There was a fight in the middle of the hallway. Then my attackers put a hood over my head. I believe there were four or five of them."

"Did you check the recordings?" Lochlann asked with a frown as he brought a cup of coffee over for Officer Pope.

Officer Pope took a sip before he frowned. "The whole system was down."

"How convenient," Golden said as he paced near the back door.

"Peyton's mom visited her today," Paxton blurted out. "She wants those guys who trespassed the other night released from jail."

I tensed up, grateful that Crew and Zane returned to school for football practice. They tried to stay home, but Lochlann and I had reminded them that the homecoming game was this Friday. It made me happy that they wanted to stay with me, but my drama had affected their lives enough as of late.

Paxton was on the right track and I prayed he wouldn't put the pieces together. We were just talking about Butch and Jana at lunch today. If Butch and Walter were using my mom, they could easily use Jana for the same purpose.

"The cameras outside the building were working, and no one came into the building. We believe it was students who launched the assault." Officer Pope shook his head. "And we can't and won't release those men. A couple of them have warrants out for their arrest. The other two have rap sheets just as bad. Do you think your mother was involved?" He turned to look back at me.

I placed a piece of pepper jack cheese and pepperoni on a cracker, hoping he didn't notice the slight tremor in my hands. I had to act as naturally as possible. Somehow, I didn't think divulging everything to Officer Pope right now was the best course of action.

If Butch was behind this, I wanted to make sure at least Kyler knew, before he was blindsided with the information. Plus, Butch had already proven how resourceful he could be. Butch had evaded the FBI and ATF the first time. I was sure that, in the years of his absence, he had only become more evasive to catch.

Plus, there was the threat to the children. I couldn't, *wouldn't*, let anything happen to them. I knew we couldn't let these people get away with it, but I wanted to first discuss it with Kyler and Lochlann. They should be able to navigate this better than I could. Right?

"Priscilla wants to mend our relationship," I continued to lie. "She left with another man. He seems to be her usual type of loser."

I popped the food in my mouth.

"Did they say anything to you? Did you recognize any of their voices?" Officer Pope continued to probe.

I shook my head as I made myself another cracker with salami and extra sharp cheddar.

"I heard a girl and a guy. The others didn't speak," I said with a careless shrug. "I didn't recognize their voices." As I continued to lie, I felt incredibly guilty. "I only take three classes and mainly hang out with the guys. I also had a panic attack," I say quietly. "A lot of things are fuzzy when it happens."

At least that was the truth.

Officer Pope looked at me in contemplation. I knew he knew I was lying.

He gave a short nod before he stood, draining the rest of his coffee. "Thanks for the coffee, folks. You know my number if you think of anything else or figure out who did this to you. You deserve justice, Peyton."

I stared down at another cracker and gave him a short nod. "Thanks, Officer Pope," I mumbled before placing more food in my mouth.

Silence hung in the air as Lochlann walked Officer Pope to the door. I could hear their murmurs as they headed down the hall.

"What aren't you telling us?" Paxton inquired the moment Officer Pope is out of earshot.

"Shutter," I muttered before standing up.

Shutter was a word Paxton and I had used when we first met. It was code for avoiding touchy subjects. I hated to use it on him now, but I didn't want to go into details as of yet. Eventually, they would know, but I needed a course of action first.

I walked over to the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water. I was still drinking my coffee, but my mouth suddenly felt dry.

"That's bullshit, Pey," Paxton said with an intensity that surprised me.

He slammed one hand on the counter while running his other hand through his hair in agitation.

"And I never agreed to the shutter crap," Golden argued. "If you know who did this to you, we need to know."

"I'm not ready to talk about it," I insisted.

"Don't give us that crap, Peyton." Golden sighed heavily. "That's not how relationships work."

I shrugged and looked at them with an impassive look. I wanted to tell the guys, but I trusted my instincts to wait.

"Whatever," Paxton cursed once more. "I'm gonna go get Clay."

Golden continued to stare at me. I continued to stare back.

It wasn't until Paxton angrily stormed away that I chased after him. I hated hurting him. He had opened up to me last night, and he deserved the truth, just not yet.

I grabbed his wrist to spin him around and grabbed him by the back of his neck. I pulled his head down to mine and kissed him. He was reluctant to reciprocate at first, but then I felt him respond. He was a bit feral as he nipped my bottom lip. It made warmth spread to my loins immediately.

When we finally pulled away, we were both breathing heavily. "Let me process this first, okay?" I pleaded softly. "I love you," I whispered near Paxton's ear. "Please drive carefully."

He stared at me for a moment before giving me a reluctant nod. "I love you, too, Peyton, but I don't like feeling like I'm being shut out. I thought we made progress in our relationship last night, and today I feel like you're retreating."

"I'm not retreating," I insisted fervently. "I'm regrouping. I need to think."

He sighed heavily and nodded before kissing my forehead. “Please don’t take too long,” he requested before turning to leave.

“I still think it's crap,” Golden muttered, but I knew his emotions weren’t as fragile as Paxton’s.

Lochlann came back into the house and looked at us in question. Golden shook his head and narrowed his eyes at me.

“Everything okay?” Lochlann inquired.

“Nope,” Golden answered, popping the “P” before turning to leave.

“Drive safely!” I called after him.

I didn’t like the idea of them driving while they were upset.

I turned and headed towards the great room. I grabbed my coffee, knowing Lochlann would follow.

“I quit the school today,” he said quietly. With his coffee in hand, he took a seat on the large sectional beside me.

I knew he had been on the phone for a long time when we returned home. I had assumed he had been talking to Grandpa or Kyler. I didn’t realize he had been talking to Mr. Fanning.

“What? You can’t!” My stomach dropped with unease. Lochlann had worked hard to achieve his goal. He had already given up a lot when his parents passed away, giving up his high-paying job in the city to take care of his siblings.

He didn’t complain about it or even seem to mind, but it wasn’t fair that he regularly sacrificed his plans for the people he cared about.

He gave me a crooked smile and leaned forward to put his coffee cup on the tray attached to the ottoman. “Let me reiterate that I *tried* to quit, but Steve wouldn’t let me. I let him know I had feelings for you and that I was done playing by rules that shouldn’t apply to us. You’re eighteen, and my job has no bearing or influence on your education. He knew I already planned to leave by the end of the school year.”

Warmth filled my chest. I was happy that Lochlann was attempting to put me first.

“But I can’t put him in that position,” Lochlann continued. “If the school board was aware of my involvement with you, and he knew about it, he would be in a lot of trouble.”

I placed my coffee on the end table and turned towards him. “You didn’t go to school for years just to quit,” I half-heartedly attempted to dissuade him from his decision.

The warmth in my chest dissipated to guilt and helplessness. I didn’t know what Lochlann could do or what would be the best solution for our relationship. I just knew I didn’t want him leaving his job for me. On the other hand, I wanted to be with him.

“You’re right, I didn’t.” He reached out and pushed a strand of my hair off my face. “However, I’ve recently realized that as rewarding as it is helping teenagers make plans for their future, it’s not where I want to be or where I’m needed.”

I leaned into his shoulder and linked my fingers with his. “What will you do?”

I felt marginally better knowing he had no intention of remaining a school counselor. However, a small part of me felt like he would have remained a counselor if I weren’t in the picture.

“I have to go back to school for a couple more years, but with Da’s shop and Mam’s royalties still coming in, I can easily go, and we’ll still be more than okay,” he explained. “I think I should become a social worker.”

“Is that what you want to do, though? Are you sure?” I inquired.

He leaned over and brushed his lips against mine. “I’m positive. I grew up seeing the passion my parents had helping children that got lost in the system. It wasn’t until we had to fight for Clay and Maisie that I saw the other side with more clarity. After talking to the social worker in charge of the case, I realized there are more children than what the caseworkers can comfortably handle. I want to help those children. I already got accepted into the program. I can start in January. I didn’t want to leave Steve hanging, but I think we came with a solution this afternoon. He’s going to the board and asking them to make me a private contractor until my replacement is trained. Apparently, he did some research after he suspected my involvement with you. If they accept his proposal, I won’t be bound by the same rules as when I worked for the school itself. It’s only a temporary position, and it’ll allow me to train someone before I start school again.”

I grinned as the implications set in. We were free to be together. I knew we still had to be cautious in public, but now Lochlann didn't have his job and future hanging above his head.

"You're ready to be back in the classroom?" I teased.

I knew he was smart and that school came easy to him. However, he had already been out for some time now.

He chuckled and shrugged. "I'm not excited about it, but I'm ready for a new challenge. Plus, it's the road I'll have to take to be in a more fulfilling career. So," he pulled me closer and placed his forehead against mine, "can I take you on a date Saturday evening after your competition? Depending on how you feel, I thought we could go to this rental up that way. We can spend all day Sunday together and come back Sunday night."

I tried to recall if I had any plans. I remember Zane mentioning a similar trip away, but that was for another competition coming up. The competition with the Christmas Village nearby was a couple of weeks away.

I laughed before launching myself into his lap. "That sounds really good."

He laughed in return, rearranging my legs so I was straddling him. He threaded his hand in my hair and tilted my head down to his lips, which he brushed with mine before his tongue flicked across them.

I moaned softly and opened my mouth to his gentle explorations. The more we kissed, the hungrier I got, and I rocked against him. The evidence of his arousal was soon pushing against me. I groaned in frustration and pleasure.

"Well, this looks hot," Kyler's dry voice interrupted our hot makeup session. "However, Grandpa Delaney is parking his car as we speak."

I squeaked and jumped out of Lochlann's lap. Sure, Grandpa was aware of my relationships, but I still didn't want him catching me gyrating on top of Lochlann.

Kyler laughed, and Lochlann grabbed my hand and linked his fingers through mine before bringing them to his lips. "To be continued," he promised huskily. He then reached over and placed a

decorative pillow on his lap. I couldn't help but giggle. It was apparent he was hiding the evidence of his arousal.

"It's about damn time," Kyler teased as he leaned against the archway.

I felt my cheeks warm. I mock-glared at Kyler, then grinned and nodded at Lochlann.

As the implication of Grandpa's arrival sank in, I was reminded of his reasoning behind the visit. I had already texted him on the way here that I was sending Enzo his way. I wanted him fired.

When the reality came rushing back, I sighed, leaning on Lochlann's shoulder. I was desperately seeking to draw strength from him. He seemed to have realized my mood change, because he placed an arm around me and pulled me closer.

"Do I need to grab a beer?" Kyler asked with a drawn brow.

All joviality in his eyes had dashed away, as if he could sense my shift in mood as well. His eyes were busy dissecting me as he examined me.

"You'll probably want one," I informed him. "I'm fine-ish," I reassured him. "Bryce just left. I'm okay."

I lifted my shirt and showed the slight mark on my hip where the tip of the knife had just caught me. Then I showed him my wrist where they were red, but not black and blue… yet. He nodded and I could see his jaw clenched as he looked at the minor damage done to me.

I grew up with an alcoholic. I watched Sean use alcohol as a crutch. When he came at me, it was always after he had been drinking.

Kyler and Lochlann both drank on occasion, but never once was I frightened by it. Hell, I had never even seen them approaching tipsiness. They would enjoy a beer or two, maybe a mixed drink every now and then, but they never overindulged.

"Can you grab me one too, man?" Lochlann grimly asked as he leaned his head on top of mine. He slowly combed his fingers through my hair, which calmed me, causing the nerve endings in my scalp to dance with pleasure.

"Sure can," Kyler agreed.

He left, and I enjoyed the calm before the storm. They weren't going to like what I had to say. Kyler and Grandpa would probably try to convince me again to homeschool. Kyler would lose it when he found out his father was back in town and had people coming after me. I didn't relish the conversation in the slightest.

"I just talked to Dr. Baylor. He informed me *physically* you are well," Grandpa said without preamble as he came into the room with an amber-colored liquid over ice.

I nodded and I realized he emphasized physically. He would always worry about my mental health unless I did something about it.

"Tell me why I had to fire one of the men," Grandpa grumbled, obviously frustrated at me for not seeking help yet.

He looked at Lochlann and me and seemed unfazed by our cuddling. He reminded me why I loved him so much. He didn't judge us, and he didn't try to convince me that caring for six men was wrong.

"He allowed Priscilla to come near me," I began. I launched into the whole story, leaving no detail out.

I worriedly looked over at Kyler as I finished my story. He was like a statue as he braced his arms against the mantel, staring into the unlit fireplace. I watched as he gripped the neck of his bottle in a death grip.

"Ky," Lochlann said softly. "Let's think first."

Kyler turned with fury in his eyes. If I hadn't known both him and his heart, I would be deathly afraid. He hid his demons with laughter and flippancy; I had never faced his darkness head-on.

As his gaze scanned over me, there was a coldness in his eyes. It made a whisper of unease dance across my spine. I shuddered, not in fear for my safety, but what he would be capable of doing at this moment.

I jumped up and went to him, hoping to talk him down. I gripped his face and forced him to look at me. I had seen those dead eyes before. Sometimes in the dark of night, when his nightmares grasped him beyond rational thinking and cognizance, I'd had to coax him back to me, reminding him that those demons didn't have a hold of him any longer.

“I’m okay,” I ardently murmured to him. “I’ll be fine. Your father no longer has a say in your life. He can’t use me to get to you or Crew.”

I didn’t know what he needed to hear or what made him sink into the dark recesses of his mind, but I had to convince him to return to me. I needed him to think with his head and not his emotions.

“I’ll hire security for Maisie and Clay, unless you want to bring them to the mansion,” Grandpa said grimly. “I have the tutors and nannies already in place. I’ve had no problems with any of their guards. As for Butch,” Grandpa said icily, “it may take me a little bit, but I’m sure I can shut him down before he becomes a nuisance in this town again.”

I knew my story had dropped a massive bomb. I knew my family was worried about me and the kids, but I was so tired of being the victim. I hadn’t experienced everything I had just to become a sniveling, frightened shell of the person I once was.

Despite her intention, Jana’s threatening the children had produced the opposite effect. Yes, I’d had a panic attack. Yes, I recognized she knew one of my triggers now. However, now *I* knew what her plan was, and I wasn’t ever going to be in a position where she could get to me again.

She had also made a grave mistake when she demanded I stay away from my men. They didn’t bust their asses, separating themselves from their “father” just to have me used against them. I wasn’t going to be their burden. I was going to defend them as fiercely as they protected me.

“Kyler, come back to me,” I bade him, touching his face. The slight stubble on his jaw felt abrasive against my smooth skin, but I didn’t mind the feeling.

He let out a low growl before pulling me in close. He wrapped me into a tight embrace. I could suffer a few moments of slight discomfort if he could pull himself out of the emotions he struggled with. Oddly enough, it didn’t bother me, and I knew he needed that from me.

He muttered a curse before he placed his head in the crook of my neck. “What can I do?” he said over my head to Grandpa. “I can’t

believe he's back." I could hear the wild beating of his heart. Under my palms, I could feel the rapid rise and fall of his chest.

"Well, we can't, nor will we, give in to their demands," Lochlann said firmly. "I know Peyton doesn't want to homeschool, but I'm sure after today she'll have a better guard. Plus, I think more than one of the guys should accompany her to her classes at all times. I'll go talk to Maisie's teachers and Clay's daycare tomorrow. Until Butch is no longer a threat, I'm pulling them. Thanks for offering your tutor's services. It would put my mind at ease knowing both kids are behind walls when they're not with us. Plus, your security is top-notch. There is no use in hiring more people when you have enough in place. I don't know if it's just an intimidation tactic or what, but I don't trust Butch."

Lochlann and Kyler had been best friends in high school. I knew Kyler spent a lot of time over here. However, I was certain Lochlann had witnessed how Kyler had lived.

"He's been lying low for too long," Kyler said candidly. "Whatever he's been cooking up can't be good. Knowing him, he's networked with more hardened criminals and sees an opportunity to prey on our community once again. And what are we going to do about Jana? I don't want her near Peyton."

"Should we tell Officer Pope?" I inquired hesitantly.

Grandpa sighed and wearily wiped a hand over his face. "If Butch operates as he did in the past, I'm not sure if that's the best idea."

I turned in Kyler's arms and looked at him in confusion.

"In the past," Kyler cleared his throat, "Butch had the cops, judges, and several other people in his back pocket. I trust Pope, but I'm certain we'll be putting him in danger if we say anything right now."

"So what can we do?" I inquired, dismayed by the knowledge.

"I'll figure something out," Grandpa said resolutely.

I tried to feel confident in Grandpa's declaration. I was filled with unease. I didn't realize the reach Butch had. Fear threatened to consume me from a different angle now. Not only did I have to worry about Tormentor, but now new players had entered the game in the form of Butch and Jana.

“What should we tell the others?” I questioned tentatively.

“I think we’ll have a family meeting tonight,” Lochlann immediately answered. “They won’t take it well, but we need to be transparent.”

“Crew’s going to go after Jana,” I inferred.

“I’ll talk him down,” Kyler said decisively.

We all were lost in our thoughts for a few moments before we heard a tiny person yelling happily. I felt slightly calmer when I realized who it was.

“Pey Pey!” Clay came running into the room with a huge grin.

I smiled and bent down to pick him up. I cuddled him and felt contentment in the pure joy he had by only seeing me.

Clay immediately straightened an arm out, attempting to push Kyler away. “Mine.” He frowned at Kyler.

Ky seemed to release some of his tension as well. He let out a mock growl, then he pulled Clay from my arms. “She’s mine, punk.” He launched him into the air.

Clay let out a sound between a squeal and a cry. “No, no, mine!” he balefully cried. He couldn’t help but giggle but was upset simultaneously. “Pey Pey, mine!”

“Gotta get through me first, little man.” Kyler launched him back up in the air. He teased him for a few more moments before handing him back to me.

I smiled and pulled Clay close. “I’m going to start dinner and text the guys. I’ll let them know we’ll have a family meeting after dinner and practice,” I decided. “Grandpa, would you like to stay?”

I hadn’t planned to be here this afternoon to make dinner, but I felt like I needed to keep busy; needed to keep my mind off of things.

“Actually, that sounds nice, thank you.” Grandpa smiled. “I have another guard heading your way tonight. Hopefully, this one is better,” he said wryly.

I took a deep breath in and shook my head. “No need, actually. I think Des is a good fit.” I looked at Lochlann and Kyler, and they nodded in agreement.

“Okay,” Grandpa said with a decisive nod. “I’ll let Des know about his new assignment.” He stood and walked towards the back

patio, his cell phone in hand. He had finally decided to join modern society and had given in and gotten a cell phone. He only used it to call people, though, refusing to text, but I felt like it was a step in the right direction.

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"What are we cooking tonight?" I asked Clay as I carried him out to the kitchen.

"Nug, nug," he immediately piped up.

I laughed because, if we let him, he would live off chicken nuggets, macaroni and cheese, and cheese sticks.

"Sorry, buddy," I shook my head, "we had chicken nuggets for lunch the other day. We need something else."

"Chee?" Clay hopefully inquired.

I laughed once more. "Let's look and see what we have to cook."

"I'll help," Lochlann volunteered.

"Me too," Kyler added.

"We're staying in tonight?" Paxton inquired as he came into the room with a handful of crackers.

I nearly forgot our original plans, but something more important had come up. Anya had already called to tell me to stay home. I knew Zane had informed her about my incident. Plus, it wasn't critical if we skipped on helping with the float. We had another week and a half before it needed to be completed.

I stood on my tiptoes and kissed Paxton's cheek. "We have a family meeting tonight."

He seemed to relax, and as much as I dreaded the conversation, I was somewhat relieved. I was finally going to give them the whole truth.

Golden was right. Relationships shouldn't be mired in secrets.

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The Ledge

Kyler, Lochlann, and I made chicken and steak fajitas with yellow rice and refried beans. We were almost done by the time Crew and Zane came home.

They both looked tired and sweaty. Their white practice pants were covered in grass and dirt stains. Their sleeveless compression tops stuck to them like a second skin. Crew even had his hair pulled back at the nape of his neck.

“Mmm, it smells amazing in here,” Zane commented, dropping a kiss on my temple. “I’m going to take a quick shower. Don’t wait on us.”

Crew slipped up behind me as I placed hot sauce, homemade guacamole, and sour cream onto the dining room table. I turned in his arms, not caring that he was sweaty. He lowered his head to my shoulder and kissed it.

“I stink and I’m sweaty,” he said almost apologetically.

“I don’t mind,” I said honestly.

He held me for several moments before pulling away. “I’m going up to shower, too. Be back soon.”

I had to admit it was slightly weird being so openly affectionate in front of Grandpa. I didn’t know when we had become so comfortable around him to do so. Honestly, it was almost a relief not having to hide our relationships.

“I’m not looking forward to this conversation,” I admitted aloud when Crew was out of earshot.

“I want to make it known how patient I’ve been,” Paxton joked as he placed Maisie’s binder back in her backpack. She had a daily reading log, and today she insisted on reading to Grandpa. You could tell how much she missed him, and the feeling seemed to be mutual.

I smiled at Paxton, realizing he was trying to alleviate the tension I was beginning to feel again. “You get a sticker,” I teased him.

He gave me a wicked smile and wagged his eyebrows at me. “Can I get something else instead?”

I shot him a narrowed look and was thankful Grandpa had gone to the bathroom. It was one thing for him to know I lived with the guys, something else entirely for him to know we were intimate as well.

Golden reached out and slapped the back of his head. “Not in front of the kids,” he admonished him with a smirk. “Maisie, can you bring down the plates and forks?”

In the last few weeks, we decided that Maisie needed to have daily responsibilities. She helped unload the dishwasher and set the table when needed.

“Do I have to?” Maisie whined. “I just got done with my homework.”

“Do you have to eat?” Kyler teased.

She frowned at him and crossed her arms over his chest. “You *have* to feed me so I can grow.”

“Maybe we don’t have to feed you,” Kyler countered back. “You’re growing too much, and we want to keep you little forever and ever.”

“Uncle Ky,” she said in exasperation.

“Moo,” he lamented in return.

“Fine,” she muttered, clearly realizing she was trying to fight a losing battle. “I’ll get the plates.”

She pushed the stool over to the counter and opened the cabinet. She turned, squinted, and began to count how many people we had. While she did that, I grabbed a few pieces of chicken and steak. I took them over to the cutting board and chopped them into tiny bite-size pieces.

“I have Clay’s rice and beans cooling in the freezer.” Lochlann smiled at me.

I should have known Lochlann was a step ahead of me in getting Clay’s plate ready. The little guy was content with plain cheerios in

his booster seat right now, but we knew that wasn't going to last long.

I smiled back. "Thanks."

I still had moments when I paused and felt like my life was so surreal. A few months ago, I would have never imagined this effortless domestic contentment. It was as though we had lived with each other for a long time. We worked together so well.

I finished chopping up the meat and placed it in the refrigerator. "Grandpa, did you want something else to drink other than water?" I asked as he entered the kitchen. "We have milk, Dr. Pepper, and sweet tea."

"I'll take some sweet tea," Grandpa said with a pleasant smile. "Sal is on his way, and Desmond will be here shortly."

Sal had already texted me to let me know that he was on his way here. We figured we could eat dinner and discuss the new development in my *protection.* I was past the point of resenting my Shadows' presence, especially with a new threat present. I liked Sal and Desmond, both of whom seemed to have worked well together the other day.

"Well, we can start finding our seats," Kyler stated after he loaded the last batch of tortillas into a tortilla warmer.

I grabbed the pot of refried beans and walked it over to the dining room table that Da had designed and hand-built. It was huge and had a convenient Lazy Susan in the middle of the table. It came in handy during mealtimes, for sure.

Golden, Paxton, Lochlann, and Kyler grabbed the rest of the stuff as I took Clay's food out of the freezer.

"Me eat, me eat," Clay crowed on cue.

"*Please,"* Lochlann gently reminded him, signing it as well.

"Peas," Clay signed back.

"Peyton's bringing it right now." Lochlann smiled.

The doorbell rang, and Paxton jumped up. "I'll get it."

After giving Clay his food, I poured a glass of sweet tea for Grandpa and myself. "Does anyone else need a drink?" I inquired.

"Do we have any Corona left?" Kyler called.

I went over to the cleverly concealed "beer" fridge and looked inside. "We do, and we have some lime already cut up. Want one?"

“Please.” Kyler winked at me.

I was happy to see he seemed to have gathered himself and had regrouped. He seemed much calmer now. I just hoped he was able to calm his brother down when we broke the news to him.

“You know what? I’ll take one, too,” Lochlann reached around me.

His chest brushed against my back, and I had to bite my lip. He smelled so good, and his casual contact was new and exciting. I looked over my shoulder and saw his mischievous smirk.

“I’m not a counselor anymore,” he murmured in my ear.

“No, you’re not.” I brushed my lips against his jawline, his beard ticklish against my lips.

“I can’t wait for this weekend,” he groaned softly before turning.

I turned around and my smile died as I noticed David in the entryway with Desmond and Sal. I hadn’t thought about texting my dad, and I kind-of-sort-of felt bad. He was trying, and I had already determined I wasn’t going to shut him out anymore.

“I hope I’m not intruding,” David said slowly as his puzzled gaze followed Lochlann’s movement.

“Not at all.” I shook my head. “Did you eat yet? I can grab you a plate.”

I tried to extend an olive branch. It shouldn’t have surprised me that Grandpa had informed him about my ordeal today. If he was serious about building a relationship, I guess I had to take a few steps in his direction tonight. Plus, we had plenty of food and had really overdone it on portion sizes tonight. We already figured any leftovers would be good to take to work or school tomorrow.

“I can eat.” David nodded.

“David, Des, Sal, come find a seat,” Kyler bade them.

“Just in time!” Zane clapped his hands and rubbed them together as he entered the room. He had changed into a pair of joggers and into another sleeveless t-shirt. He had so many looks—his dance gear, school outfits, practice uniforms, gameday uniforms, and lounging outfits. He carried all his looks so well.

I could also tell he was trying to cut the awkwardness in the room. I appreciated his attempt. He was always good at sacrificing his feelings to put others first.

“David, Des, Sal, what would you like to drink?” Paxton inquired. “Beer, Dr. Pepper, sweet tea, water, milk?”

“I’ll take a beer,” David said.

Crew stepped up behind me and grabbed a Corona too. On occasion, Golden and Crew would drink with the older guys. Again, they never overdid it, and I didn’t see the harm in it.

“Did Peyton make the sweet tea or Paxton?” Sal smirked.

“One time!” Paxton protested. “I add salt instead of sugar and I never hear the end of it.”

The table erupted in laughter at the memory. “It was dis-gust-ing,” Maisie said dramatically.

“I made it this time.” Lochlann chuckled. “*And* I used the sugar.”

“It’s tasty,” Grandpa agreed.

“I’ll take tea too, then.” Desmond smirked.

Paxton poured their drinks before we headed back to the table. I took the seat between Clay and Golden. We all began to dig in, and soon the awkwardness had dissipated. It wasn’t until Maisie chimed into the conversation that Kyler, Lochlann, and I froze.

“Tomorrow’s crazy hair day. If I get up early, can you do my hair, Peyton?” Maisie asked.

Lochlann cleared his throat. “I’m not sure you're going to school tomorrow, Mai. After dinner, the grown-ups are going to talk while we let you play on the tablet.”

“Why wouldn’t she go to school?” Paxton frowned.

“Because,” I said tactfully, “a more beneficial education plan may have popped up after today's events.”

I gave Paxton a pointed look. Understanding finally seemed to dawn over his face, creating a deep frown as he contemplated my words.

“What about my friends?” Maisie inquired mutinously.

“I thought it was time you met my other grandchildren,” Grandpa chimed in. “They're not ready to go to school with you, but I thought it would be nice if you met them and maybe told them about real school. Faith is the same age as you, and she’s never been to school.”

“Does that mean I don’t have to learn anymore?” Maisie said with renewed excitement.

We laughed at her enthusiasm.

“They are being taught,” Lochlann informed her. “Just differently. They have tutors.”

“Why haven’t they ever been to real school?” Maisie prodded next.

“Their… parents didn’t put them in school,” Grandpa explained diplomatically.

“They lived far away from any schools,” I added as a memory assaulted me.

After my return, I had done my research on the cabin. It had been secluded, and it came as no surprise why no one ever discovered the odd dynamics there. The closest school was fifteen miles away. Even then, it was a private school of sorts. All the classroom sizes were intimate and small. Everyone up that way valued their privacy and lived a simple, reclusive life.

Golden reached over and kissed my temple. “This guacamole has to be your best batch yet,” he complimented.

I smiled thankfully at him.

Lochlann continued to reassure Maisie about her upcoming changes. “Clay will be spending the day there with the nannies as well,”

“Did you get a new nanny?” I inquired.

I knew Grandpa was supposed to video-interview Sal’s sister. With her previous work experience, I hoped she was a good fit for them.

“Salvatore’s sister,” David confirmed. “She starts on Monday.”

I wanted to ask him if Catherine had returned, but I knew it was a touchy subject. I hadn’t seen Leah today, so I had no clue if she had. If she hadn’t, I’m sure Leah would have blamed me once again.

I nodded and looked over at Salvatore. He grinned at me in return. He seemed pleased that his sister would be nearby.

“Golden or Paxton can you take the children over to Grandpa Delaney’s tomorrow? I’m going to stop by their daycare and school to let them know we’re temporarily removing the children,” Lochlann said.

“Paxton has a yearbook meeting,” Golden reminded Lochlann. “I can drop them off.”

“I’ll make sure the guards are aware of the changes,” David explained.

“Can I be excused?” Maisie held out her nearly empty plate.

“Sure can,” Golden confirmed. “Why don’t you go upstairs and take a shower? Peyton will come to check on you in a little while.”

The moment she was out of the room, Paxton looked over at me. “Okay, what’s really going on?”

I retold the story once more. I told them how I had been intentionally separated from Zane. I informed them how it had been all planned. Then I finished with the bomb. I just hoped the detonation didn’t cause too much damage.

“It was Jana,” I breathed out. “She wants me to get those guys that trespassed the other night released from prison. She demanded that I stay away from Crew and Kyler. Butch wants his sons to join the *family* business. She threatened me. She said they would do something to Clay and Maisie if I didn’t give in to their demands.”

Yep, it was like I had detonated a bomb.

Within moments, chaos ensued. Crew stood with such force that his chair came crashing to the floor. Clay started crying in fear and surprise. I immediately reached over and took him out of his booster seat. I tried to soothe him and took my eyes off of Crew for less than ten seconds.

I heard scuffling and realized Crew had been ready to take off and hunt down Jana. That’s what I had been afraid of. It took Kyler, Lochlann, Sal, and Des to subdue him. They were able to pin him down to the ground, their breathing coming out in ragged gasps.

“Get off of me. I’m gonna hunt that bitch down, I’m tired of her games. And I’m going to castrate Butch,” Crew growled.

He was like a wild animal. His eyes were dark with unconcealed rage. He thrashed about, attempting to throw the guys off him. I handed Clay over to Golden and then walked forward. I knelt beside Crew’s flailing form, careful to avoid his destructive appendages. I placed a calming hand on his forehead.

“Crew,” I bade him gently. He seemed unable to hear me in his rage. “Crew,” I cried more forcefully.

His eyes focused on me—his chest heaving.

“We have to think with our brains,” I said calmly. “We can’t go in there with guns blazing without realizing what we’re up against. We already hypothesized that Butch’s operations are getting bigger. We don’t know if he has new associates and what they're capable of. We need to approach this logically, not emotionally. We can’t think of a temporary solution for a potential long-term issue. We’ll come to a resolution together. Butch and Jana don’t only affect us. Butch’s plans involve our whole town, so we need to consider that too. But, Crew… I’m okay. I’ll never let my guard down again. The children will be safe at Grandpa’s. Please don’t go off half-cocked.”

Silence filled the room for several moments before Crew gave a jerky nod. He sat up, and I could see his hands still shook with rage. His breath was ragged, and I could see he was perilously close to losing complete control. Kyler, Lochlann, Sal, and Des took a step back but kept a wary eye on him.

Crew was still on the ledge and I had to talk him down. So, I crawled into Crew’s lap and braced his face with my hands. I stared into his eyes. They were almost eerily glacial. It was as if he were looking straight through me.

I leaned in and pushed his hair off his face, tucking a long strand behind his ear before whispering, “You’ve come a long way. Butch no longer has control over your life. He can make as many threats as he wants, but he won’t ruin all the hard work you’ve done. You’ve come a long way from that broken-down trailer. You practically raised yourself for years, Crew. You’re a superstar on the field, on the honor roll. Talent scouts have recognized this. The school realizes this. We, your *real* family, all realize this. Don’t let him take it away from you. And don’t let Jana throw you off your game. Your future is spread out before you, and Butch wants to drag you down. Jana knows you wouldn’t take this lying down. She hoped to rile you. Don’t let them get to you. *I* need you. *We* need you.”

“I need a ride,” he finally muttered as he rubbed his restive hands over his face and through his hair. He exhaled loudly.

“Not by yourself,” Kyler asserted.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Crew growled. “I promise I won’t do anything.”

“Let me get my riding gear on.” I hopped up.

I could understand his restlessness, his need for freedom. I grasped the concept of how a ride could bring calm. The hum of the bike, open roads, and solitude would center him.

“Peyton,” Golden said with warning as he patted Clay’s back soothingly. “Is that wise after what they did to you today? Plus, your bike is still in the shop.” He gently bounced Clay and fed him a piece of chicken.

I appreciated his concern, but I’d already determined I was tired of feeling like a victim. The idea of a ride was rather enticing, actually. Kyler and Crew had another bike I could ride. It wasn’t pretty, but she rode like a dream.

“We don’t know who’s watching you,” Paxton added with a deep from. “It’s not safe for you out there.”

“I agree with Golden and Paxton,” David argued. “Butch—” he gave Kyler and Crew an apologetic look—“can be a psycho. Once he sets his sights on something, he won’t relent until he gets it.”

“We’ve seen what Butch can do, and probably what he *will* do,” Kyler said, squeezing the bridge of his nose. “However, we can’t allow him to intimidate us. That’s his whole intention. I’ll go with them. We’ll be riding full riding gear and we’ll go out the back. Just a ride.” Kyler looked at Crew then me.

Kyler understood Crew needed this outlet, too. It probably wasn’t the wisest decision. However, I didn’t think Butch or Jana would expect us to go out for a ride after the bee's nest they’d thrown at us. They would expect us to lay low and hide.

“I brought my bike back with me,” Salvatore said into the tense silence. “And I’m carrying.”

Lochlann and Zane seemed to refuse to meet my gaze. However, I could tell Paxton, Golden, and David hated the idea. I had been the one attacked today. I had been the one that escaped psychopaths a few weeks ago. So I should be the one to determine what I could and could not handle. And right now, I was tired of living in fear.

Grandpa took a few steps forward and looked up at Crew. “You have my granddaughter with you. Don’t do anything stupid.”

Crew gave him a short nod of acknowledgement.

“Peyton!” Maisie yelled from upstairs.

I had forgotten entirely about Maisie in the shower. “I’m coming,” I yelled back. “I’m going to go help her, and I’ll be right back,” I turned to Crew, Kyler, and Sal before I turned to run up the stairs.

I could tell Golden and Paxton wanted to argue, but they needed to understand that Crew wanted this, and in a way, so did I.

●

When we returned home, I was an icicle. The hand grips did little to stave off the cold, but I had zero regrets. I’d forgotten what a rush a night run could give me. The ride had started out to be for Crew, but the longer we rode, the more I realized we all seemed to have needed it.

About an hour into the ride, we stopped at an all-night diner and got dessert and coffee. Crew had remained silent, but the conversation with Kyler, Sal, and I had been entertaining. I really hoped winter would take its time setting in, because I needed more nights like tonight. It had been a much-needed break from reality.

The moment we stepped back into the house, I could tell Crew was a lot calmer. Yes, it still ate at him, but at least he was in the right headspace to deal with it. Kyler and I seemed to silently agree that he wouldn’t do anything rash at this point.

“Go with him tonight,” Kyler murmured to me.

“Are you sure?” I asked him hesitantly.

I wanted to sleep with Crew tonight, but I had every intention of sleeping with Kyler. It was his night, after all.

He softly kissed my lips and caressed my cheek. “He still needs you,” he insisted.

I stood on my tiptoes and brought his mouth down to mine. I nipped his lip before sliding my tongue against his. He made a sound between a groan and moan. It probably wasn’t fair to kiss him with so much pent-up passion if I couldn’t help him with the repercussions. However, I wanted to show him my appreciation. I wanted him to realize how much I cared for him. He was selfishly putting his brother's needs above his own desires.

“I love you,” I whispered as our lips separated.

His eyes widened for a moment, and mine did too as I realized I had blurted out my feelings. I hadn’t meant to, not yet

anyhow.

A smug grin crossed his features before he pulled me in closer. I could feel his erection against my stomach, and I let out a soft gasp of desire.

“I love you too, kitten,” he admitted. “I just didn’t want to scare you and say it first. I knew I loved you the day we went shopping for your house. I remember picking you up that morning and thinking, ‘Damn, I’m gonna marry that girl one day.’ As the day progressed, I realized that I never felt that type of contentment and rightness with any other female in my past. I knew the other guys liked you, but it still didn’t matter to me if I only got a piece of you.”

I leaned against him and wrapped my arms around his neck. “I love how thoughtful, selfless, and fiercely protective you are for all of us, Ky. I love how you make me laugh and how driven you are to succeed in business and life. Remember when that older couple thought we were married? I didn’t realize it then, but I do now; I can’t imagine a future without you. I didn’t know I could find love with one man, let alone six, but I’m so happy you’re one of them.”

He smiled once more before kissing me until I was breathless. He finally pulled back and forcefully turned me away. He lightly smacked my ass and pushed me in the direction of my bedroom. “Text my brother to meet you in your room before I change my mind.”

I felt like I was floating. My life might not have been an easy one. Trouble and drama seemed to find me no matter where I went, but at least I was loved and cared for. At least I knew I had people in my corner to weather the storm with.

I gave him a saucy wink and smile. “Goodnight, baby.”

“Goodnight, kitten,” he murmured in return. “Love you, sweet dreams.”

My face hurt, my smile was so vast. “Love you too,” I said in return.

17

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Absent

I didn't realize I was still chilled to the bone until I began to disrobe. I padded over to the bathroom and started filling up my bathtub. I needed to submerge myself in a hot tub. I walked over to the linen closet and pulled out some candles and a bath bomb.

As I waited for my bath to fill up, I lit the candles and strategically placed them around the room. It was late, but I wanted to set a calming tone for when—or if—Crew joined me. Before I left the bathroom, I dropped the bath bomb in. Then I pulled out my phone.

Me: Will you sleep with me tonight? I'm in my room. The bath is filling up right now.

A small smile curved my lips remembering the last time I took a bath with Crew. He had taken such good care of me after an incredibly difficult period. I remembered that was when he'd told me about his past relationship with Jana. She'd had such an amazing guy and had let him go.

She had chased him for so long, and when she finally had him, she took him for granted. She had expected him to bail her out continually, betraying his trust when she started hooking up with someone else. She made other decisions that still affected him to this day. She had cut him as deep as his mom and dad had when they abandoned him.

I saw the bubbles pop up on my screen, so I knew Crew saw it. I waited for his response and then waited some more. I twisted my ring around my finger as I began to worry. After several moments I felt my earlier euphoria begin to dissipate. I wasn't going to force him to come to me.

I wanted to give him space if that's what he needed. However, I wished he would communicate that with me. I could understand

that he was under a lot of pressure from Butch, Jana, football, school, and all my drama.

After a few more minutes, I gave up. I plugged my phone into its charger and hooked it up to Bluetooth, then went into the bathroom to turn off the bath before slipping in. I hissed when I realized it was a little too hot but gritted my teeth and sank the rest of the way in.

I threw my hair up into a messy bun and sighed. Suddenly, my day caught up to me. I was exhausted, my limbs heavy. I told myself I'd only remain in the tub for a moment longer. Just long enough to erase the chills from my body.

I closed my eyes as the sounds of *Antidote* by Faith Marie filled my ears. Like most songs I listened to, I tried to choreograph movements in my head, tried to immerse myself in the lyrics and figure out the best way to translate that into dance.

I heard a slight sound and my eyes snapped open. Crew stood in my doorway dressed only in a pair of sweatpants. His hair was wet, and I could smell his body wash from where I was sitting. I greedily perused his body and couldn't help but admire it. He'd grown bigger in my absence.

When my eyes reached his, I noticed the war within was still raging.

I held my hand out to him, and he didn't hesitate before he shucked off his pants. His cock wasn't soft but not as hard as it could be. I was torn between wanting to take him into my mouth and just allowing him to set the pace.

No matter how aroused I was, I wanted to show him I was there for him. Whichever way he would have me, I would take him. I knew today had been emotionally hard on him. It was bad enough that he had waited nearly a full day before divulging Butch's return. Then, less than an hour later, I was attacked by Jana and some of Butch's other people.

Like Zane, Crew felt guilty for his actions. He would continue carrying the guilt even if it was senseless. I wasn't fooled into believing that his need for vengeance was gone. I just had to figure out a way to keep him away from the ledge.

He climbed in behind me and pulled me in close. I would remain silent until he talked− if he talked. I would be there for him like he had been there for me, taking his cues and following them.

We sat in the bath for several moments. I linked my hands with his and leaned back into him. I felt his full arousal on my back but made no move to do anything about it.

“It was Kyler’s night,” he finally rasped out.

His voice always had a raspy quality to it—however, it was more throaty from hours of disuse.

“You needed me more,” I said simply before turning around to straddle his thighs.

His jaw clenched and he cradled my face in his large palms. “If I would have said something earlier, we could have probably prevented what happened to you today,” he said gutturally.

“If I had trusted my instincts, we would have stayed away from the crowd to begin with,” I said, trying to shrug casually. I had to make him see that his not telling me sooner had no bearing on today's events.

I touched his cheek. “We can play the ‘what if’ game all day, Crew, but ultimately, neither one of us is responsible for what happened today. Butch and Jana are responsible for what happened. You already know what they're capable of, and what little I know of them, I don’t think anything we did would have prevented something from happening. They both seemed pretty determined to do whatever the hell they desired if it benefited them. Jana wants you back. She’s made it clear from the moment I stepped into the picture. Butch, for whatever reason, has decided he wants you and Ky by his side. From my understanding, both of them will stoop to any level to get what they want.”

“I don’t know if I can control myself if I see Jana tomorrow,” he admitted. “I have never raised my hand to a female, but after what she did to you, I wanna make sure she knows never to fuck with you again. I don’t give a shit if she tries to manipulate me or attempts to strong-arm me, but she went too far when she messed with you.”

Was it wrong that his words turned me on? The desire that had been silently humming beneath the surface was rising. I grabbed his face and kissed him.

I knew I had surprised him when his mouth opened and I took the opportunity to slide my tongue against his. He let out a low growl before he grabbed my hips. I knew he just wanted to pull me closer, but I wanted more, so I took it. I reached into our warm bath water and grabbed his hard cock. I lined him up to my entrance and wasted no time sinking down onto him.

We simultaneously groaned. My body wanted to tense because of Crew's massive intrusion, despite my heightened arousal. He froze and threw his head back. He muttered a curse. It had been too long since we had been intimate.

I grabbed his shoulders and began to rock against him. It hurt so good. I vaguely registered that *Chataje* by Shakira and Maluma was playing on the speaker. I might have only understood a word here and there, but my hips recognized the beat regardless. Soon, I found myself rotating and grinding my hips to it.

He growled and lifted me out of the tub. We dripped all over the floor as he carried me into the bedroom. He was still inside me, and I tried to find some leverage so I could continue grinding against him to the beat of the music. He fell backwards onto the bed, me still wrapped around his front, and sat up on his elbows, and I realized he loved the unintentional show I was putting on for him.

I got lost in the music and the feel of him. He was biting his lip and letting me work myself on him. I leaned forward and braced my hands on his chest, needing something to hold onto as his cock deliciously brushed against my clit.

I sank my nails into his chest, and his hiss and grunts made me loosen my hold. He shook his head and put his hand over mine, letting me wordlessly know that he liked me marking him. Unintelligible sounds left my lips as I felt my orgasm begin to build.

When Shakira's *Hips Don't Lie*, I changed the rhythm, and he noticed. He lunged up and captured my mouth with his. His kiss was invasive and erotic, and his tongue tangled with mine. His hands grasped my hips firmly, but he didn't stop my movements. His touch only intensified them as he found the same rhythm to work me on his cock.

The build-up of my orgasm hit its crescendo, and I let out a keening cry as the feeling gripped me. I understood now why the

French called orgasms *the little-death,* because I felt like I was floating somewhere between reality and nothingness. As I was coming down from my orgasm, Crew withdrew from me and flipped me onto my stomach. He lifted my hips and slid back into me.

I cried out at the new position. Crew timed the thrust of his hips with the music as well, and I moaned at how deep inside me he went. It was a pain I welcomed, though, as he pulled me back to him at the same time he surged forward. I was surprised to find I was close to another orgasm.

“Don’t stop,” I begged him, and he must have realized how close I was because he reached around and began to play with my clit.

His fingers rubbed me in a frenzied manner. “Come with me,” he rasped, and I did.

I silently screamed as white spots danced across my closed eyelids. I heard and felt him following close behind me. His hips slammed into me with a frantic pace, and he sounded like a wild animal as he came inside me.

His thrusts slowed, and the moment he released my hips, I collapsed in a boneless heap. Our heavy breathing intermingled. He collapsed next to me and placed a heavy arm across my waist.

“Holy shit,” he finally muttered.

I didn’t know why, but I started giggling. It echoed my inward sentiments exactly. I felt equally invigorated and sleepy. I crawled towards my pillow.

“You’re leaking,” he said almost smugly.

After sex, I generally liked to clean myself up and use the bathroom, but even the idea of leaving the bed was too daunting and exhausting.

“I can’t,” I almost whined. “Sleep.”

“Wait a second, angel,” he softly chuckled.

I paused my efforts in getting under the blankets and burrowing in their sweet, beckoning haven.

The bed shifted as Crew got up. I heard the tub drain and some splashing before he padded back into the room. I listened to him blow out the candles. Then I felt the warmth of a wet cloth applied to the inside of my thighs. He cleaned me up, and I smiled at his

thoughtfulness. I really needed to pee, but I wasn't able to lift my heavy limbs.

"Thank you," I mumbled as he proceeded to lift the blankets and tuck me under.

"No, thank *you*." He kissed the spot between my shoulder blades before he turned on the fan.

I shivered, but I didn't protest. I had gotten accustomed to Crew and Kyler running hot. They liked sleeping in an icebox.

Crew pulled me in close, and I curved into him. I was almost asleep when his raspy voice whispered in my ear.

"Do you trust me?" he inquired.

I yawned and burrowed in him. I thought it was an odd question. My brain wasn't quite functioning. "With my life. Why?" I prodded.

"Do you know how much you mean to me? That I'd do *anything* to protect you?" he asked after several beats of silence right as I was on the verge of sleep once more.

I laughed softly at his evasiveness. I knew he was my protector. I also understood he still felt guilt over today. "I know," I reassured him as I traced my nails against his arms. "But you can't blame yourself for what happened today."

He sighed deeply and was silent. He kissed my temple and murmured something I was unable to understand as sleep finally claimed me.

●

I was looking over my shoulder constantly the next day. There was a weird vibe at school. I couldn't pinpoint the exact reason why until we reached English. I had been dreading going to that class because my acting skills had to be on point. Also, Jana was in that class.

I didn't want to cower or show her any fear. However, I didn't want her to realize I had told Crew and Kyler what she had done on Butch's behalf, either. She was volatile without the aid of the drugs she pushed and sold. She was highly unpredictable and unstable without adding them to the mix.

Unlike most of the teens and young adults she ran with, I knew she never hit the hard stuff. Much like Butch and her father, they liked distributing and profiting from the drugs they wouldn't touch themselves. The guys told me they smoked weed recreationally but refused to go near the harder stuff.

"She's not here," Zane confirmed as he led me to my seat. "A lot of her 'friends' are absent, too."

I nodded and sighed in relief.

"I don't even understand why she still comes to school, other than distributing her wares," Paxton scoffed. "If she makes so much money pushing, why bother completing her education?"

I began pulling my book out of my bag. Paxton's comment piqued my curiosity. I didn't want to talk or think about Jana, but I was trying to look at it like a case of "knowing my enemy." If she planned to come at me continually, I should be prepared.

The more I learned about her, the better.

"What better place to find vulnerable people hoping to find a brief escape from reality than a high school?" Golden commented with a shrug as he pulled out his literature book.

"She knows how to prey on the easily swayed," Zane added. "Remember that kid last year?"

I cocked my head to the side in confusion. I hadn't heard that story. Since Crew wasn't here to get upset, I hoped I could learn more about Jana.

Crew had stayed behind with Coach Leech to review some plays. It was getting close to a big game day. Here, most teachers didn't seem to mind if the coaching staff chose to pull a player in for a meeting during the school day. It was an odd and new concept to me. Football was a big thing at my old school, sure, but not nearly as huge as it was here.

For a smaller "backwoods" school, I was surprised how many of their athletes got accepted into collegiate sports. Only a tiny percentage ever went pro, but the amount of talent they groomed here was astounding.

"Dwayne Newman, yeah." Paxton sighed and shook his head before he looked at me. "He was the new kid last year. His parents had just divorced. He moved here with his mom last summer. His

mom started dating this new rich guy, so she gave Dwayne a lot of freedom and money to play with. When he first started showing up at parties, he seemed like a pretty decent guy, right? But it didn't take him long to start drinking and trying to start fights with everybody and anybody. It was clear he was trying to drink away his pain.

"Jana started flirting with him, and, I think, he really believed she was interested in him. He knew she was dating Crew at the time, but he didn't care because this beautiful woman was coming on to him. In fact, he snorted his first line off her stomach. It wasn't long before he was buying harder stuff from her. He was in rehab by Christmas."

"What did Crew do? Where was he?" I asked in shock. "Why didn't anyone tell him what she was doing?"

"None of us knew about it," Golden explained. "We tolerated Jana because she was dating Crew. Crew knew we didn't care for her, so he barely brought her around. He didn't hang out with us as much as he did with their group of friends."

That knowledge surprised me. The way they hung out, I assumed they had been this tight for years.

"Crew has never been into the party scene or crowds," Golden continued. "Jana tried to drag him along, but he was… indifferent with her tears, threats, and manipulations. He refused to give in to them and told her to go on without him. Eventually, she realized it was better if he didn't go with her, so she stopped asking. She recognized she could influence people with her body, looks, and lies. She made a lot more money when Crew wasn't around."

"Crew never realized what she was doing?" I asked, mystified.

"I don't think he really cared," Zane said bluntly. "I know he told you they have a history together. She pursued him, and he finally gave in. But I don't think he ever had real feelings for her, so he never bothered to verify her stories and lies."

"Wow," I whispered as I tried to process it all.

"If Mrs. Baker doesn't show up in, like, five, I'm bouncing," one of my classmates stated loudly.

I looked up at the clock above the whiteboard and frowned. The class should have started ten minutes ago. I'd been so caught up talking with the guys I hadn't even realized that the late bell had rang a while back.

“What’s taking her so long?” another girl whined before popping her gum obnoxiously.

“Maybe she got a call from her kid again?” another guy chimed in.

One of the students—Jere, I think his name was, or something like that—stood up. “I’m walking. Who’s with me?”

English Lit. was the only class I had with him, but I had seen him in the halls. He was on the unbearable side. Rumor had it, he was some hotshot baseball pitcher. Unlike Zane and Crew, he was cocky about his athleticism. He, too, had college scouts watching him.

“Chillax, Jere.” One of his buddies laughed before digging out his phone.

I looked up and noticed Sal, my favorite Shadow, hovering in the doorway. He was my guard for today. He was vigilant without hovering or being overbearing. I had a newfound appreciation for him after yesterday's disaster.

He beckoned me forward. When I stood, the guys stood as well.

“Hey, Princess, where ya going?” Jere asked as I walked forward.

“Mind your own, Jere,” Golden sneered at him.

I ignored Jere and smiled inwardly. I reached the door and looked at Sal.

“What’s going on?” I whispered.

Sal leaned down. “Grab your bags and come with me.”

From the look in his eyes, I wasn’t going to waste my breath by asking him any questions. A queasy feeling hit my stomach, but it wasn’t that silent alarm I felt yesterday. I looked at the guys and silently nodded to them.

We wordlessly packed our bags back up and started to head back to Sal.

“Yo, Princess Delaney, what’s going on?” Jere called out.

Golden was in his face once more. “Don’t make me break your fingers,” he hissed in his ear. “You kind of need them to throw a ball.”

The look of pure madness in Golden's eyes surprised me. I had never seen him so lethal. Oddly enough, I wasn't scared.

Jere looked up at him and visibly swallowed. He had to outweigh Golden by fifteen pounds or so and was an inch or two taller. Somehow, some way, Golden intimidated him. It made me wonder what Golden had done in the past to command that respect. I filed the thought away to ask him later when I didn't feel so tense.

"Y'all just sit tight until someone comes in here," Sal told the classroom.

I could see the confusion and a little fear in some of my classmates' eyes as we left, but I also knew no one would disobey my colossal Shadow.

We passed a few classrooms, and I immediately noticed how none of the teachers were lecturing. Most of them seemed to be preoccupied with their cellphones. I looked over at the guys and realized Zane had been scanning the area as well. He raised an eyebrow at me, and I shrugged in bewilderment.

He reached over and linked my hands with his, and I squeezed his in return.

Sal turned towards the rear parking lot door. "In a few minutes, they'll be evacuating your school and sending everyone to the gym or practice fields," he explained as we got outside.

In the distance, I could hear sirens, and I moved closer to Zane.

"What happened?" Zane demanded.

Golden pressed into my other side. I hadn't entered the school or walked to any of my classes without at least three of them all day long. They took their "job" just as seriously as Sal did. I knew none of them wanted a repeat of yesterday.

Admittedly, I had been anxious and on the verge of a panic attack several times today, but their presence and diligence had helped me immeasurably.

"They found a girl in the bathrooms," Sal said after several tense seconds.

"Okaaay," Golden prodded.

"It looks like she overdosed," Sal explained gruffly.

The shock I felt was mirrored in all the guys' eyes. I didn't know who it was, but I *felt* it just the same.

"Your friend found her." Sal grimaced.

"My friend…" my voice trailed off as I realized he meant a friend of mine. I didn't have many girlfriends. The only girls I could comfortably speak to were Heather, Marie, and Renee. I didn't trust the other females that took a sudden interest in me. I hated being so suspicious, but I trusted no one.

"Renee?" Zane frowned.

Sal nodded.

My heart dropped. I wanted to go to Renee and comfort her, but I knew that was impossible. Sal wouldn't let me back into the school, mostly since the school would be evacuated shortly.

"I don't want her to be by herself," I fretted aloud.

"Do you want me to keep her company?" Paxton inquired.

Paxton and Renee had formed a friendship. He was kind to her before I was taken and it had only grown from there. I had zero fears of her growing fond of him in a romantic sense. She was loyal to a fault. She would never betray me, and neither would Paxton.

I knew he regarded her as a little sister. In many ways I thought she reminded him of Mandy. They had a lot of similarities, and it seemed to bring him some comfort. Renee humored him, and they bickered like siblings at times. She treated him like an overbearing brother. I wasn't threatened or suspicious about their relationship in any way.

I give him a short nod before I turn to Sal. "Do you think they will let him see her?"

"She's in with Lochlann," Sal informed us.

He wasn't permitting Paxton to go; however, he wasn't going to stop him, either.

Paxton needed no further bidding. He leaned down and brushed his lips against mine before he turned and went back inside.

"I don't think it was a coincidence that Jana and her little dealers aren't here the same day someone overdoses in the bathroom," Zane grimly stated as we entered the gymnasium.

The uneasy feeling I'd had returned in full force. I hadn't even put two and two together yet. I saw the validity in Zane's statement.

“Does Grandpa and David know?” I asked Sal.

“I called them immediately,” Sal answered. “All the other parents are being notified as we speak. Grief counselors are being called in, and they’re making sure this doesn’t get out of control.”

The sirens were blaring loudly now as they pulled up in front of our school. I reached out for Golden’s hand and leaned into Zane.

The *Nothing* had been my companion in the past. There had been days that seemed to stretch with no joy, peace, or happiness. There had been times I just wanted the pain, hurt, and hopelessness to just cease to exist by any means possible.

Something, or someone, had always kept me from embracing my companion, the Nothing, completely.

When she was hoping for that brief moment of relief, did that girl who overdosed know that she wouldn’t come back from it? Did she have anyone that would miss her? Had it been a way just to feel good, or had it been an escape? If she had someone that loved her and cared for her, were they blithely carrying on about their day? In a matter of moments, they were going to receive a visit or a phone call from someone. Did they know their world would be forever altered for the rest of their lives?

I felt myself falling down the rabbit hole, and Zane must have noticed, too, because he tugged on my hand.

“Come on, let’s practice our duet.” Zane led me towards the empty dance room.

I eagerly nodded. I needed the escape. I needed my drug of choice. I needed to release the tension in my body that was strumming me tight. I needed the music to sweep through my brain and carry me away as my body followed its rhythm.

18

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Homecoming Game

The butterflies of anticipation and nerves always took flight in my stomach the moment we reached our venue. I had always associated those feelings with dance, and I never thought I could feel the same anticipation for cheer. Since Ms. Houser had taken over as coach, I enjoyed it more.

The routines she had us learning were heads above what we had been learning before. Ms. Houser had ensured stunts and tumbling would be incorporated into our halftime show. I had to grudgingly admit we looked good. She recorded our practice yesterday, and today we reviewed it, polishing it up.

We were patiently waiting in the tunnels before our big homecoming game. The guest team's cheerleaders had just taken the field, and the announcer was reciting their football players' starting line-up.

"I should have peed when I had a chance," Freddy grumbled by my side.

I giggled and looked over my shoulder. "The football team's locker room is right there," I teased Freddy.

"I'll hold it," he sniffed dramatically.

It was no secret that the team's locker room was sacred. The football players would yell and shun any of the male cheerleaders from using it. There was a reason we utilized the locker rooms next to our training room.

"Am I the only one that feels like throwing up?" Marie asked as she bounced restlessly beside me.

"You'll be fine," Heather reassured her with a hug.

The rhinestones on her blue neck gaiter caught the light, causing the tunnel to sparkle. I nearly cried when Heather came in with a box full of them this afternoon. She knew I always wore

something on my neck. The thought hadn't even crossed my mind about what I would have done tonight without one.

Unbeknownst to me, she had asked Ms. Houser if she could order gaiters that matched our uniforms. She had shown me she was by my side in silent solidarity, and I could have kissed her for it. Plus, it was a cute addition to our uniforms.

Of course, Leah, Nan, and Flossie had protested, but the rest of the squad had outvoted them. Even the guys had chosen to wear them. I appreciated them all the more for it.

We all peered out into the crowded stadium, which was packed on both sides. The nerves among us were nearly palpable.

The school spared no expense to make this a big night. Typically, they didn't have this much fanfare and hoopla with the announcers, but tonight was one of the exceptions. Not only did both teams have the current best records in their division and the state, but it was also Senior Night. During our halftime show, all the seniors in our school would be recognized.

I heard the speakers begin to play *Hall of Fame* by The Script and will.i.am. The adrenaline was intoxicating.

"Showtimes, ladies and gents!" Ms. Houser called excitedly.

The seniors were staged to exit the tunnel first. Some of the seniors chose to sashay out, but a few of us decided to go out tumbling. Once we reached our marks, we picked up our pom-poms, and those who were assigned picked up the paper banner with *Spartans* emblazoned across it. Our team would make their grand entrance by running through the latter as our starting lineup was announced.

I didn't even attempt to pick up the sign because I knew Leah, Nan, and Flossie had already "called it." Leah had started another campaign against me, and I steered clear of her. Somehow, she had decided to place the blame of her parents' separation onto me.

Catherine Delaney hadn't returned to the house, and according to the rumors, she was filing for divorce. I didn't understand what she hoped to gain from the proceedings. Catherine had always struck me as someone who liked the prestige of being married to one of the richest men in town. Plus, she wasn't going to

get much, if anything, from a divorce. She would get her freedom, sure, but she couldn't get as much blood as she wished to spill.

Unfortunately for her, David had an airtight prenuptial agreement. She wouldn't get much in alimony or child support. More than likely, the judge would allow Claire and Dylan to choose who they lived with. From the sound of it, they wouldn't be electing their mother.

Catherine's family lived several towns over. They were well off but weren't considered anywhere near as wealthy as the Delaneys. She had run home, and Claire and Dylan were content to stay where they were. Claire was getting tutored, and her therapy with her private therapist was going well at David's.

Dylan had no desire to start a new school, and he had become very protective of Claire since her return. Apparently, he had set up parental controls and walked David through monitoring her internet activity. For a pothead-ex-bully, he knew his way around electronics rather well.

I waited until Marie did a few stunts in front of me before I performed a round-off, layout step-out, two backhand springs, and another layout step-out. Once I stuck my landing, I picked up my pom-poms. The crowd was screaming in excitement and anticipation, amping up our energy. The stands were filled with signs and fans, their painted faces showing their school spirit. Our school colors were represented as far as the eye could see.

My smile was broad and natural as I waved. The crowd erupted with more roars as our guys showed up in the tunnel. I leaned forward to locate Crew and Zane. I knew they'd be in front of the team.

My smile broadened as it met Zane's eyes. His severe and contemplative look was immediately softened as he grinned at me. I decided to be flirtatious, so I winked and blew him a kiss. I tried to catch Crew's eye, but I knew he was in the zone. He took his position on the field seriously, and he needed to focus. I didn't take it personally as he peered off into the distance. He shifted from right to left as he held his helmet in one hand, the other hooked into his jersey collar.

I grinned, remembering his reaction to me wearing one of his jerseys to school today. I'd been rewarded with one of his rare smiles when he saw me enter the school wearing it over a pair of leggings.

Now that Ms. Houser was in charge, she'd given us the option to wear either our uniforms or school spirit wear on game days. I knew I would be one of the few not to wear my barely-there uniform, but I was okay with that. I chose comfort over cuteness.

As the starting line-up was announced, they ran forward. I laughed when Zane stopped to kiss my cheek. He was rarely playful, but I knew he was happy to have me back and cheering for him.

It was Crew's turn next. He reached out so that our hands brushed. It wasn't the grandest of gestures, but it was enough. I knew he was acknowledging me and didn't take it personally. He wasn't as demonstrative. I was well aware of his quirks by now, and oddly enough, they were just as endearing as Paxton's need to have my undivided attention.

"Good luck." I smiled at him.

As if conjured from my thoughts, Paxton and another member of the yearbook team positioned themselves near us. He took several pictures, and when he was across from me, he lowered his camera for a second.

"Squeeze in closer, Peyton, Heather, and Marie," he called out.

Heather and Marie closed the distance between us.

"Strike a pose. Charlie's Angels style," Heather insisted.

I laughed and watched as the girls pretended that their fingers were guns and pointed them in opposite directions, their backs pressed against my side. I decided to make my hands into a gun as well and raised my arms into the air. Paxton shook his head, laughed, and continued down the line.

Heather, Marie, and I looked at each other and laughed. The energy around us was infectious, and I was feeding off of it. Right here and now, I wasn't thinking about Sean, Priscilla, Tormentor, Butch, Jana, or anyone else that had occupied my thoughts lately. I almost felt like a typical eighteen-year-old female senior.

"So, who are you taking to Homecoming? You can't take them all, Peyton," Leah said slyly.

I rolled my eyes, choosing to ignore her.

“That’s none of your business,” Heather said through her teeth, her smile never slipping.

“Who says she can’t?” Marie snorted, then grinned and waved her pom-poms high in the air. “Green is an ugly color on you, boo.”

“What do I have to be jealous of? I took Zane’s virginity sophomore year,” Leah said smugly before yelling and jumping up and down. “She has my sloppy seconds.”

Bile filled my mouth with that thought. I hated knowing he was with her before. On the other hand, however, I’d technically met him through her. So there was that.

“You can thank Leah for everything Zane knows,” Nan said with a vindictive grin.

“Let’s be real.” Heather laughed. “If we were all worried about your sloppy seconds, Leah, we would all be celibate.”

“You’re the doorknob of our school. Everyone gets a turn,” Freddy said snidely to Leah.

Heather and Freddy still acted awkwardly around each other, but I noticed how they got along for my sake. It was evident they still wanted to be my friends despite what had gone down between them.

“Got her there,” a football player added as he ran past.

“There’s a reason she’s known as an easy lay,” another football player added. “Chapman was smart when he dropped her.”

Freddy, Marie, and Heather immediately began laughing, and I couldn’t help but grin. I appreciated the way they all stuck up for me. I might’ve still made me slightly uneasy knowing she and Zane were once intimate, but it wasn’t a tough act to follow after Leah. There was a reason Zane broke up with her—her beauty might have fooled him once, but he was smart enough not to stay with her.

“He didn’t drop me. I dumped him!” Leah yelled, stomping her feet.

“Yeah, okay, I’ve seen your texts.” I forced a laugh and shook my head.

Believer by Imagine Dragons began, which was our cue to fall in behind the football team. We broke off, and as directed, we ran to our fans and tried to pump them up more. I noticed Sal, Des, and the additional guards Grandpa had hired for tonight situated all along the

sidelines. Mr. Fanning hadn't hesitated to permit extra security tonight.

The school was still in that weird limbo ever since the girl in the bathroom, Dove Bartlett, overdosed. The school had been closed the following day, and yesterday, grief counselors had started calling students into the counselor's offices. For a brief moment, they contemplated canceling tonight's games but determined there was no reason to.

Dove Bartlett had been a junior. She left behind a loving mother, step-father, father, step-mother, two brothers, two half-sisters, a stepbrother, and a stepsister. She had been a good student, was in the school band and on the field hockey team. Her friends even claimed she'd never had any issues with her family, and her parents still got along despite them not being together.

No one had witnessed her purchasing the drugs or understood why she took them. Her best friend had said, as far as she knew, Dove had never taken drugs. She also stated that Dove had recently started *talking* to one of Jana's known associates, a guy who hadn't been at school the day she died. He also had an alibi, claiming he'd been sick that day. Jana and two other students who were known to hang out with her hadn't returned to school yet, which both comforted me and made me suspicious simultaneously.

"Pey Pey!"

I heard my name being screamed and noticed Kyler holding Clay near the front of the bleachers.

I paused in my rallying and used the rails to climb up onto the stands. Golden, Lochlann, Kyler, Clay, Maisie, Mr. Jenkins, Grandpa, and David, along with Ava's kids—Hope, Gideon, Joy, and Raphael—were all sitting together. As I leaned over to kiss Clay's cheek, I noticed Anya making her way toward my family, and I felt my eyes mist over.

I knew she was a very busy woman, and with a big dance competition tomorrow she was more so. I was half-thinking she was going to forget the promise she had made me. I hadn't reminded her, though, because I knew she was stressed enough with Renee's absence the last few days. Finding Dove the way she had that day had significantly affected Renee.

After I had gotten off dance that night, Paxton and I had gone over to Renee's house. She was in her bedroom, mindlessly watching television. I hadn't made her talk to me, but I had held her until her sobs had subsided. Grandpa had sent a therapist over to her house yesterday, but she remained absent.

"You look beautiful, Kitten," Kyler growled now as he leaned in towards me. "I'm taking my night tonight."

Crew had "graciously" given him his night tonight. I couldn't wait. Kyler had been swamped the last few days with work, so I only saw him before morning dance. My body warmed up just thinking about what I planned to do with him later.

"Can't wait." I coyly grinned up at him before waving at Anya and the rest of my family.

"Come on, Pey," Freddy laughingly called to me.

"See you guys later!" I grinned as I waved to them once more.

I looked for Zane, who was busy in the huddle, knowing he rarely looked into the stands. I couldn't wait for his mother to join him on the fields to honor the seniors. The athletes would have another banquet at the end of the year, but that one would be with all the sports teams, so it wouldn't be the same.

I knew Zane would be shocked to see his mother at halftime. He would never admit it or ask her, but I knew it meant a lot for her to be there for him. I just had to make sure Paxton captured those images. I was sure they were going to be frame-worthy.

●

The energy remained high as we entered half-time leading by three points. It was both exhilarating and nerve-wracking watching the guys− my guys mostly− play. There was no doubt in my mind that Zane and Crew were leaving one hundred and ten percent on the field.

Zane hadn't thrown even one interception and had hit his target every time. In turn, Crew hadn't allowed one guy to touch Zane, let alone get near him. If they lost today, which I hoped they didn't, it wouldn't be from a lack of heart and soul.

Over twenty cheerleaders took the center field as the opposing team ran into the locker room. It had already been decided that we'd do our half-time routine before the seniors got recognized.

We all took our positions on the field as the student council set up for the ceremony.

Our music began—a mash-up of several songs that were upbeat and fun to dance and cheer to. Leah, Heather, Madison, and I took our spots on our four corners as the rest of the squad danced near by. I waited until Heather made her pass before I did a round-off, whip, and four back-handsprings into a back tuck. The crowd went wild, and I couldn't help but smile as I moved my hair out of my face and discreetly pulled my Spanx from where they had ridden up. After Freddy and a few other guys did their tumbling passes, I took my lineup position.

Freddy had been disgruntled after Madison had taken my spot, but I was okay with it. It was easier to learn the dance moves instead of doing the stunts. The half-time routine leaned more towards hip-hop, and out of all the dancing I did, it was honestly the least stressful for me. I always had fun with that style, and I felt that it showed as I popped my hips to the beat.

In one part of our routine, I had to take center stage with Madison; still, my smile remained. I wouldn't allow her or anyone else to affect my mood tonight. No, she hadn't stopped her campaign to become my friend again, but it was becoming easier to ignore her.

By the time we were done, we knew the crowd enjoyed it as much as we had. Leah, Nan, Flossie, Freddy, Heather, Marie, Madison, and I were ushered to the makeshift stage. We were the only seniors on the team.

"Mom's here," Madison murmured behind me. "She knows that we… had a falling out, but she would still love to see you."

I sighed and twirled my ring around my finger.

Vivian, Madison's mom, was a nice woman. She was the one who had gotten me on their cell phone plan. She also never cared when Madison passed her clothing castoffs my way, some of which Madison hadn't even worn. Back then, I was so far below their social station, but Vivian had never made me feel that way.

It wasn't her fault Madison betrayed me. I shouldn't—nor could I, really—ignore her because of her daughter. After all, she had permitted Madison to move here on my behalf. Kind of. Sort of.

“I’ll say hi to her,” I said concisely as the announcer started the ceremony.

My mind wandered for a moment. I had been devastated back when I had to leave Lucas and Madison. When I used to imagine our senior year, I pictured us doing many things together as we always had. I always saw them by my side.

I never thought me moving was a possibility. I definitely never imagined myself joining cheer. It had been Madison’s passion, and before everything went down, I would’ve been giddy and excited to be doing this together. But I couldn’t garner those reactions. Her betrayal cut deep, and I had no clue where to go from here.

“Thanks, Peyton. She misses you and asks about you all the time,” Madison leaned in and whispered.

I nodded as Heather squeezed in next to me. “Small get-together at my house after the game?” she inquired hopefully.

I knew she was still uncertain how to act around me sometimes. It was weird, sure, but never uncomfortable. I understood this was new territory for her, and I appreciated her for trying. It was better than how others treated me.

I noticed Madison roll her eyes at Heather’s back. They never talked to each other; like ever. I had a feeling whatever happened with Freddy had put a wedge between them as well. They’d gotten along so well at my birthday party—that was until Madison had hooked up with Freddy.

It was almost surreal at times to realize how far apart Madison and I were now, despite the fact we were in the same location, like old times. We cheered together. We were in a new school together. This should have been an exciting life change for us, but it wasn’t. Her actions had caused our paths to separate.

At a time when my lifelong best friend should’ve been there sharing my life with me, she no longer was. I had the guys and a few friends I had grown close to. And for the first time since kindergarten, we didn’t have the same group of friends.

It was hard throwing away fifteen years of friendship. It was difficult to forget all the good times we had; and we’d had a lot. If I were to write down a list of our relationships' pros and cons, the pros

would far-outweigh the cons. However, some betrayals and actions were hard to forgive.

“I have a competition tomorrow morning,” I finally answered Heather.

A part of me really wanted to hang out with Heather, Marie, and Freddy. The other part just wanted to go home and relax for the night. I had an early morning, and after the excitement of this week and tonight, I needed to decompress.

On the other hand, Heather having the forethought to order and pay for our neck coverings had shown me the depth of our friendship. It was in the infant stages, but she had already shown me she was someone I can rely on. Plus, when we were together we did have fun.

“If you want, I can ask the guys if they don’t mind having a little get-together at our house tonight,” I said a bit reluctantly. “My Shadows had a long day, and I feel a bit selfish asking them to go out again.”

Honestly, I felt safer at our house. With Jana and Butch hovering in the dark, I didn’t trust them. Plus, I wouldn’t put Heather and them at risk because of my decisions. We had guards around the house, twenty-four seven. We also had a top-notch security system. If I did choose to hang out with people tonight, it would make more sense to have it be at our house.

“Sounds good,” Heather said with a smile. “I want to do something but nothing crazy,” she reassured me. “Let me know what the guys say, and if you want, I can stop and get pizzas on my way or something.”

I appreciated the fact she could understand that my situation wasn’t normal. I could no longer go out and do whatever I wanted. She might not know exactly all the dangers that lurked out there for me, but she understood my need for control.

I smiled and nodded. “ Okay. I’ll let you know as soon as I do.”

They called Zane’s name then, and I noticed a few of the underclassmen come forward. They awarded the football team players a football in our school colors. It also had a picture of the player on the ball, their names, and numbers. It was such an incredible and thoughtful gift.

I witnessed Zane accept the ball with a broad grin. He held it up and smiled. When he was handed flowers to “gift” his parents, he looked confused for a moment. He probably didn’t understand why he was being handed flowers and not an engraved pen.

It was decided that the mothers, aunts, etc., would be gifted flowers. Whereas the fathers, uncles, brothers, etc., were given pens.

Zane turned towards the stands where our gang resided, and his jaw dropped. I swear I could see a sheen of tears enter his eyes as his mom took the stage with him.

Anya was openly dabbing her own eyes with a handkerchief as she hugged her son close. She whispered something in his ear, and I saw him nod as he buried his face in her hair. I didn’t know if I imagined the shudders that wracked his body, but when he pulled away, his eyes found mine, and I saw the gratitude in them.

I wasn't taking full credit for this one. I couldn’t. I was just happy I could tell Paxton to be ready with his camera. I was delighted that Anya was there to see her son, where she could realize he hadn’t wasted his life by learning how to play football, that he was not only a very talented dancer but was also just as awe-inspiring on the field.

After Anya made her way back to the stands, Zane made a beeline towards me. He uttered no words, and I realized he was still feeling emotional. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, and I didn’t even care that he was sweaty as I leaned into him.

Crew's name was called next, and our little section of family and friends erupted the loudest once again. I watched Kyler make his way down from the stands as Crew was presented with his ball. Kyler made a great show of removing his leather jacket, and as he drew closer, I began to giggle.

He was wearing a shirt that said *#1 Big Brother* emblazoned across it. His shirt was also covered in pictures of Crew in various stages of life. Crew looked annoyed by his brother’s antics for a split second before he shook his head and ducked to hide the smile on his face.

They were so much alike, yet so different. It became apparent the more I got to know the brothers. However, there was no denying the bond and love they had for each other.

When the student council member tried to hand Crew an engraved pen for his brother, Crew shook his head and grabbed a bouquet instead.

The stadium was laughing as they watched everything unfold. For those that weren't close enough to see the stage, a jumbotron had Crew and Kyler in hi-def. I laughed some more and was comforted as I felt Zane chuckle as well.

Kyler made a dramatic gesture of fanning his cheeks. He accepted the flowers and gave Crew a big kiss on his cheek before embracing him in a hug that would crush most mortals' bones. I laughed and leaned into Zane more.

Zane brushed his lips against my temple. "Thank you. How did you convince Mom to come?" he inquired huskily.

I grinned and shrugged. "Well, you kind of did," I informed Zane. "I told your mom if you danced with me in the competition, then she would have to watch you play tonight."

He laughed again, and side hugged me.

The rest of the football team got called up, and then the cheerleaders. When my name was called, I got slightly emotional when Grandpa and David presented me with flowers and chocolate. I didn't even care that Leah hated me more by the end of the night.

●

Blue, gold, and white confetti clung to my hair as Freddy, Marie, Heather, and I jumped up and down, screaming and laughing. The game had been tight the entire time. We were up by three points at the half, but by the end of the third quarter we were down by ten. In the fourth quarter, we gained more points after a touchdown and then an interception, followed by the winning touchdown.

Fans spilled out of the stands to converge on the football players who were attempting to run off the field. I noticed Des, Sal, and a few of Grandpa's security form a protective circle around me. Their presence couldn't affect the euphoria I was feeling, though. I was so happy and proud of my guys.

They had played their hearts out and earned the victory.

"What a game!" Grandpa smiled as he and the kids joined me on the field.

“The best,” I agreed as I hopped from one foot to the other in an attempt to ward off the chill in the air.

He had the double stroller with Raphael and Clay in it. Both of them were sound asleep despite the noise surrounding them. They were all tucked up in blankets with only their faces visible. The temperature had dropped drastically since the sun had gone down.

Marie and Heather immediately began to shower the rest of the kids with affection.

“Was this your first game?” Marie asked Hope.

She nodded as she ate her nachos. “It was fun.”

I knew Grandpa was slowly trying to integrate them into normal society on the recommendation of the therapists. He was beginning to plan outings for them, and this afternoon, Hope, Gideon, and Joy had expressed an interest in attending the game. With the additional security and all the extra hands, Grandpa felt comfortable taking them out.

“What’d you think?” I asked Gideon as he hid and clung onto Grandpa’s pant leg.

“I learn?” he inquired hopefully. “Throw ball?”

At three, he wasn’t the most loquacious. The speech therapist had determined his and the twins’ verbal skills weren’t where they were supposed to be.

“I’m sure Zane will show you,” I told him.

His resemblance to Coach Carson was uncanny; it was something I forced myself to ignore.

“Now?” he begged.

“Not tonight. It’s almost past your bedtime!” I laughed and shook my head.

“Next time, buddy,” Grandpa reassured him.

Gideon pouted but nodded.

“Here,” Lochlann murmured behind me.

I was immediately engulfed in warmth and his scent. He had removed his suit jacket and placed it on my shoulders. I wrapped it around my body and grinned up at him.

“Do you mind if Freddy, Heather, and Marie come by for a bonfire tonight?” I inquired. “It won’t be a late night… Zane and I need to leave the house by six.”

“You know our house is your house.” He smiled gently at me. “I can order some pizza and wings online and pick them up on the way home.”

“Thanks.” I reached out and grasped his arm. I longed to kiss his cheek, but I couldn’t with everyone surrounding us.

We might have taken several steps forward in our relationship, and Principal Fanning was aware of it, but Lochlann still had a reputation to protect. I could be patient in my affections towards him. We had a plan and we were going to stick to it.

“So, a get-together at your house tonight?” Freddy leaned in, not even pretending like he hadn’t been eavesdropping the whole time.

Maisie had a set of pom-poms and was circling him. Whereas most of the other kids looked tired or were sleeping, she looked like she still had an abundance of energy.

It was going to be so much fun putting her to bed tonight. Not!

“I need to ask Zane and Crew how they feel about it,” I surmised, answering Freddy.

They had a more physically exhausting night. If they weren’t in the mood for company, I didn’t want to make them feel obligated to give into my whims. I knew they were willing to do damn near anything for me at the expense of their own feelings.

I stood up on my tiptoes and looked around.

Grandpa looked confused for a moment before a wide smile spread across his face. “They’re over there.”

I followed his pointer finger line and noticed Crew, Zane, and Kyler deep in conversation with a man. The man had a pair of khakis on and a purple and gold polo.

“Who’s that?” I asked in confusion.

“My guess is a college football recruiter,” Lochlann said with a smile.

“That’s the University of Albany’s colors,” Grandpa confirmed.

“Do you think he’s interested in them both?” I inquired.

I knew their dream was to go to college together. However, I knew the likelihood of that happening was slim to none. Part of me was filled with excitement for them, yet a part of me realized reality was setting in. My future was still hazy. Ultimately, my goal was to

end up in New York City. It wasn't far from Albany. We could try to make it work.

"Not sure," Lochlann said with a furrow between his brows. He knew their desire to remain together as well.

"They'd be fools not to take them both," Mr. Jenkins grumbled as he joined us. "Their chemistry and teamwork are already established. Those recruiters would be smart to capitalize on that."

I smiled at his blunt assessment. I tried to push back all my doubts and fears, attempting to remind myself that I shouldn't worry about those things until we were faced with them.

"Peyton!" I heard my name squealed out.

I turned, seeing Vivian and Madison approaching me. Des and Sal immediately cut off their path. Vivian looked shocked that they would prevent her from coming near me, but I was thankful that they were taking their job seriously.

"It's okay, guys," I gently informed them.

I hesitantly stepped into Vivian's outstretched arms and tried not to stiffen up as her cloying scent enveloped me. Vivian always had a fondness for perfumes with intense floral aromas. Her fashion sense and poise were things to be admired. However, her choice of fragrance was not. I had never been a fan.

"How are you?" she immediately inquired as she stepped back and cradled my face.

Madison was her mini. They were both petite barbie dolls. All of Vivian's childhood pictures eerily resembled Madison's. She was still a beautiful woman, and I imagined Madison would look exactly like her in a little-over twenty years.

"I'm fine," I automatically responded.

She gave me a look, and I smiled sheepishly and shrugged. I was having a great night. I didn't want to ruin it with her concerns. I understood her desire to ensure I was okay. However, I needed to stop being reminded of what I had gone through.

"I'm getting there," I amended concisely.

She scrutinized me before nodding, apparently satisfied with my brush-off. "You looked lovely out there, sweetie. I never knew you were interested in cheer."

“I wasn’t,” I admitted ruefully. “I needed an elective, and the school had dance here. Only it wasn’t dancing, it was cheer. So I decided to stick with it.”

“Maybe Madison influenced your decision slightly?” She grinned.

I stifled a sigh. Vivian’s life revolved around Madison—not that there was anything wrong with that. Only, she took it to the next level. She believed her daughter could do no wrong and thought everyone was enamored with her daughter’s charisma. That was the case in most people Madison drew in, but Vivian should have realized by now that I had never been a person easily influenced by anyone.

I mean, sure, we had been best friends, but dancing had always been my first love. When Madison switched to cheer, I hadn’t followed because I knew my passion lay in the studio. When we began high school, Madison chose electives more befitting to her skill set. I had chosen different ones. I believed Vivian thought I had done that to avoid any “competition” with her daughter, but I never saw Madison as my competition. She was my friend. I had nothing to prove.

I chuckled uneasily. “Not really.” I shrugged. “My original elective wasn’t available, so I had to stick to what I knew.”

She nodded, but I saw the doubt in her eyes. “Now, tell me about this silly little fight you’re in with Madison. You really can’t throw away fifteen years of friendship over a silly little boy!”

I rarely saw this condescending side of Vivian. I knew it existed, but it was never directed towards me. I tried not to take offense. I knew she was only trying to make Madison happy, but she needed to remove her blinders and realize that Madison’s decisions weren’t praised nor honor-worthy.

I cleared my throat. “With all due respect, Vivian, this is between Madison and me. There’s a lot more than just a ‘silly little boy’ involved. Right now is not the time or place to have this discussion. Please,” I added as an afterthought.

“Hi,” David appeared from nowhere. “I’m David Delaney, Peyton’s father. You must be Madison’s mother.”

I blinked in surprise, thankful for his timely intervention. But my relief was momentary as I watched Vivian eye-fuck David. I barely refrained from rolling my eyes. I didn't think Vivian had ever stepped out of her marriage. However, Vivian and her husband were awful flirts. They flirted with the opposite sex constantly.

I asked Madison about it once, and she laughed. She told me it kept her parent's marriage fresh. They had a theory that they could peruse the menu to their heart's content, but they couldn't order off of it. She said both of her parents were jealous by nature, and they needed the reminders that they were still desirable in other people's eyes.

I thought it was an unhealthy approach to keeping the flame alive in a relationship. Still, I tried not to judge Madison's parents, especially since I hadn't ever been in a serious relationship. They had been together for over twenty years, so it must work for them.

"I am," Vivian cooed. "Peyton, you never told me your daddy was a handsome man."

"Because she just found out about me." David gave her a look full of exasperation that he quickly concealed. "I made a lot of mistakes, where Peyton was concerned, but I'm hoping to make it up to her."

"Woo hoo!" Kyler came bounding over to us, seemingly oblivious to the awkwardness in the air. "Both of them. They want both of them!" He scooped me up, spinning me around before turning to embrace Lochlann and picking *him* up.

I was slightly confused until I saw Zane and Crew walking towards us with their arms thrown over each other's shoulders. They were both grinning from ear to ear, and Zane was excitedly talking.

"Albany?" Grandpa chuckled.

They nodded, and Zane stopped short. "They want us to come to tour the campus."

"That's the school Madison got accepted to!" Vivian exclaimed excitedly. "It's great you're going to have friends going with you."

I nearly groaned aloud. How could I have forgotten? I didn't trust Madison not to chase after one of them once I was out of the picture again.

19

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Explorations

“Ready for bed?” Kyler inquired as he gently stroked my upper arms.

I nodded and took a sip of water. “Please.” I smiled.

Marie, Heather, Freddy, and a few other football players and cheerleaders had come back to the house with us. Everyone that accompanied us understood that it wasn’t going to be a crazy *let’s get drunk* night. They accepted the fact that Zane and I had an early morning and a monumental competition tomorrow.

It had been a fun night. As promised, Lochlann had picked up pizzas, subs, wings, and pops for us. Kyler and Crew built a fire in the large bonfire pit for us to hang around. One of the football players brought his guitar, and he and Golden kept us entertained most of the night with their playing and singing. It was the perfect way to end the night, even if thoughts of Madison possibly attending the same school as Zane and Crew threatened to put a damper on it.

“Goodnight, all.” I somewhat reluctantly got up from my position off the blanket and between Paxton’s opened legs.

“Going to bed already?” Heather pouted.

I laughed as I looked down at my phone. “I wish I didn’t have to, but it’s past midnight, and five-ish is gonna come way too soon.”

Zane and Lochlann had already gone to bed nearly half an hour ago. I tried to hang out for a while longer, but I had felt my energy flagging, and Kyler had noticed. Golden and Paxton didn’t seem to want to end the night yet, and I insisted earlier that they stay up and continue hanging out. This was the first time any of the guys had hung out with anyone outside of the house since my return. I didn’t want them to think they had to revolve their lives around me and my schedule. I appreciated it, and it made me extremely happy, but I understood the importance of them having their own lives.

Paxton hopped up, too, giving me a hug and a kiss to my jawline. Golden embraced me next and kissed my forehead. I tried not to look at my classmates.

I knew they wondered how our arrangement worked. It was no secret how affectionate the guys were before I was taken, and it had only increased since my return. I knew rumors flew around the school about my reputation, but I'd stopped caring. Being kidnapped had taught me life was too short to care what others thought. I wouldn't say that I still didn't get self-conscious about it anymore, or that it didn't bother me when people judged us without really knowing us. However, at the end of the day, we were happy and that was all that mattered.

"You need to let us know when you have a competition closer," Marie insisted. "I would love to see you in person."

I opened my mouth to ask her what she meant, but then I remembered that many of the news outlets had shown clips of me dancing in my absence. Some of them had even managed to find footage of me dancing when I first started competing when I was around six. It was slightly disconcerting how intrusive the media had been. There were many competitions I had no recollection or recordings of. It was slightly disturbing how many people were privy to my past.

I had already been a victim once in the hands of my captors. The media exploitation of my past may have garnered interest for my return. However, it gave many strangers an assumption that they knew me and were entitled to intrude into my life. I now had a jaded view of the media. Yes, I was glad they had brought awareness to my and Claire's abduction. Yet, I didn't particularly appreciate how they assumed that they could continue to harass us and demand a story.

It just proved they had no sympathy, or empathy, towards anyone they had to exploit to gain a story. The media wanted to sensationalize everything, not caring that they were "harming" us. We− well, me for certain− wanted to put my experience behind me. I didn't want or need their continual intrusion in my life. They were relentless, and no matter how many times my Grandpa's lawyers

threatened and or implored them to allow us to have our privacy, they found loopholes to ignore our wishes.

“I think the next one around here is in, like, three weeks.” I tried to smile at her interest. “I’ll let you know for sure. It’s about forty-five minutes west of here.”

“Great, let us know,” Heather enthused.

I smiled, nodded, and gave everyone an encompassing wave. “Night y’all.”

Kyler slipped his arm around my shoulders and led me inside, and it wasn’t until then that I realized Crew had followed us in.

“Goodnight, angel.” He bent down and brushed his lips against my cheek.

He embraced me, and I noticed his… stillness. Zane had been riding a high since they got invited to tour the school in New York. He had been more outgoing and chatty than I had ever seen him. Crew, on the other hand, seemed to lose some of his excitement after Vivian’s announcement.

I thought I had covered up my dismay in time. Despite Madison’s acceptance there, I trusted Crew and Zane. I knew they were fiercely loyal, and even if we ever parted ways− not that I anticipated that happening, nor desired for it to—I was being realistic. We were eighteen. Life hadn’t dealt out all our cards yet.

In the event that we broke up, I was confident that they would never entertain dating or talking to her out of respect for me. Our relationships were tested continuously in the fire, and we were still coming out strong and together.

My only fear was the lengths Madison would go to insinuate herself in their lives, especially now that Vivian was aware of the situation. I was positive Vivian would be pushing a friendship between the guys and Madison. She automatically assumed Madison was entitled to everything I had.

I was sure Vivian viewed Madison’s move as a great sacrifice for me. She'd pretty much said as much. Vivian continued singing her daughter's praises, attempting to “guilt” me into forgiving her daughter. So, I was sure she would try to use the guys and elevate their acceptance into Albany to ingratiate Madison back into my life.

Vivian was even more relentless than Madison. She probably even knew—or knew of—someone acquainted with the board of admissions, the dean, or someone as equally important. Madison's parents' reach was far. I had no doubt Vivian even had a hand in Madison's acceptance at the college.

I had witnessed her influence several times growing up, had sat at their dinner table as names were dropped. When I was younger, I didn't quite understand it, but the older I got, the more I realized how important it could be to have a strong network of friends and acquaintances. You never knew how they could help you in the future.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I murmured to Crew before lifting on my tiptoes and placing a kiss on his jawline.

Zane and I had to be up so early because we were riding the bus again, which Anya had accounted for any mishaps, stragglers, and even the speed the bus could comfortably go.

Crew nodded and pulled me in closer. His behavior struck me as slightly odd, but I knew that he'd been on an emotional rollercoaster all week. The return of Butch, Jana's disappearing act, and Dove overdosing this week seemed to have shaken his typical unflappable countenance. I worried about him, but I knew he would talk to me when he was ready.

When Crew headed back outside to join our friends, I frowned. "I'm concerned about him," I admitted to Kyler as we headed towards my room.

Kyler sighed and threaded his fingers through mine. "Me, too. I've tried to talk to him, but… you know how he is."

"I do," I said wryly as we headed down the stairs. "I know talking isn't Crew's forte, and he processes things… differently, but sometimes I lack the patience to wait, though."

"I think you've handled him better than most of us," Kyler said before pushing my bedroom door open.

"I just feel like I could do more," I admitted. "I feel like Crew holds back sometimes because he thinks I'm fragile or not emotionally prepared for what he has to say. I wish he would lean on me as I lean on him." I sighed heavily before making my way into the

bathroom. “I’m gonna hop in the shower. I smell like wood smoke, and I don’t want to get up any earlier than I have to.”

I loved the smell of burning wood; there was nothing more comforting when the air grew colder. It just wasn’t an odor I liked to smell clinging to my hair as I attempted to sleep.

I leaned into the shower and adjusted the temperature to get it as hot as I liked it.

“I know Crew holds a lot in. He always has,” Kyler explained as he leaned against my vanity. He crossed his arms over his broad chest, crossing his left foot over his right foot. “Butch was an abusive piece of shit when he hit the bottle. Crew learned early on to be as silent as possible, so mostly he wasn’t on his radar. It took me a lot longer to learn to keep my mouth shut and make myself as scarce as possible, though.” He let out a self-deprecating laugh. “I was hard-headed, stubborn, and mouthy. I became that way to protect Crew from Butch’s attention, but eventually, I almost got a high defying him and pushing back every chance I got.

“It wasn’t until Da and Mam opened their homes to us that I recognized that, sometimes, I made our situation worse. It was at their dinner table I realized my brother could laugh and had a voice. I figured I could give that to him, too. A military recruiter came in and filled my head with ideas as well. I was determined to make enough money to get him out of that situation for good. I wish I would have thought it completely through. I knew Crew could make himself scarce around Butch, I just never expected Butch to run and leave him with nothing, though.”

I could see how it still bothered Kyler. His typical, affable visage was nowhere in sight. After his initial blowup, he seemed unaffected by Butch’s reappearance. I assumed he had come to terms with his father’s presence, realizing Butch wasn’t worth his time or effort.

I realized now that he was just as troubled as Crew, but in a different manner. Butch’s presence reminded Kyler of his faulty preconceived notions that he had failed his younger brother. It opened the *What-if* door. The *What-if* door almost always led you to a dead end. It was an entrance better left slammed shut.

“I don’t think that’s your burden to bear,” I reassured him before removing my clothes. “You had the right intentions. How were you to know that everything would go down as it did? If you would have stayed, what would have changed? Nothing. Butch would have still left. Then you would have both been stuck in a challenging situation. I already know how close-minded this town can be. I’ve seen them judge you and Crew over Butch’s sins. If you had stayed here, your future wouldn’t have been as promising.

“What job did this town offer with the same pay and benefits? And, yeah, I didn’t know you back then, but I assume you were a lot less… put together. You needed to experience life out of this town. The military forced you to grow up and instilled principles in you that I don’t think you would have ever gotten here, Kyler. You didn’t fail Crew in any way; you protected him the best you could. Mam and Da stepped up and stepped *in* when it was needed. They gladly provided him the love and support he needed while you became the man he needed more.”

I stepped into the shower allowing my words to sink in. I didn’t think Kyler would ever stop blaming himself, even if he knew that Crew had never felt abandoned. Crew looked up to his brother and would never condemn Kyler for his choice to leave. I knew that without a doubt.

Kyler had a more positive influence on his brother's life than he realized. Crew had a good work ethic because of Kyler. Crew held good grades in school, busted his butt on the field, helped around the house, and still found time to work for Kyler from time to time. Kyler’s drive and passion affected Crew more than either of them would ever know.

I was rinsing the shampoo out of my hair when the shower door opened. “Can I join you?” Kyler asked, his voice raw.

I blinked the stream of water out of my eyes, pulled my hair out of my face, and looked at him. I immediately felt the warmth spread in my stomach. I didn’t think I would ever get tired of looking at my guys. They all were uniquely mouth-watering.

Kyler and Crew were nearly even in height and the tallest out of all of the guys, but Kyler was the broadest. However, instead of looking like a meat-head, his body was a testament to all the

physically hard labor he did five to six days a week. He was the first man on his work site and the last to leave.

He never asked his guys to do anything he wouldn't do. He was probably at a place where he could sit and focus more on his business's paperwork side. Instead, he chose to work alongside his men for most of the day.

"You never need an invitation to join me," I said a bit huskily.

He gave me a grin, and most of the shadows in his eyes diminished. He removed the conditioner from me and squeezed a generous portion into the palm of his large hands.

"I can't wait to see you dance again tomorrow," he admitted before turning me around.

"Oh, yeah?" I asked in surprise as he distributed the conditioner in my hair.

"Yes, ma'am." I heard the smile in his voice. "I've seen a lot of dancers, and you just have… *it*. When you get lost in the music, your body almost seems to float across the stage. It's so hard to take my eyes off of you. Everyone's eyes seem to be naturally drawn to you, even when you do your group numbers. I thought I was slightly biased the last time we saw you compete, but I overheard quite a few people echoing my thoughts."

I was almost sheepish by his compliment. I've been told by so many people what a great dancer I was. Zane had voiced a similar sentiment. But enthralling this huge, contractor, savvy businessman flummoxed me. It was probably one of the best compliments I had ever received. I almost admitted as much, but I knew I needed to lighten the mood we had been in.

"Thanks, baby," I murmured before looking over my shoulder. "I thought for sure Misty or Candy would be more your preference when it came to dancing. Do they still work at Ruby Reds?"

It was no secret that Kyler had dated a couple of strippers. Ruby Reds was a strip club right outside town limits. I found out it was slightly classier than the clubs back at home. However, the girls removed everything, save the pasties over their nipples and the g-strings. I also knew Misty and Candy were common stripper names, although I had no clue if any woman at Ruby Reds had those names. I was taking a wild guess.

I bit my lip to prevent the smile from threatening to break free.

I yelped seconds later when I felt a sharp sting to my bottom. I whirled on Kyler, my eyes wide open, my mouth gaping.

“Did you just spank me?” I asked incredulously as I began to giggle.

It stung, but I knew I had provoked him. It hurt, but it wasn’t painful, if that made sense.

He smirked. “Naughty girls get spankings.”

I was still gaping for a while before I narrowed my eyes on him. “If you're gonna spank me, at least tie me up first,” I said, tongue in cheek.

It was his turn for his jaw to drop.

I might have been a virgin when I started seeing my guys, but I grew up with two very open and talkative best friends. They had no qualms kissing and telling or comparing notes. I had to admit there had been times I had Googled their conversations to see if what they talked about was legit, or an over-exaggeration.

Suddenly his gray eyes darkened to nearly black. He licked his bottom lip and took a step forward, forcing me to take a stride back. My back met the cool tile of the shower wall. I didn’t know if the gasps escaping my lips were from the shock of the cold or the desire I saw gathering in his eyes. Maybe it was a combination of both.

He had been semi-erect when he joined me in the shower, but there was no doubt he was fully erect now. His long, thick cock bumped against my stomach as he pressed against me. I bit my lip to keep from moaning aloud. The warmth in my stomach pooled between my thighs.

“Do you wanna play, kitten?” he murmured huskily before his nose grazed my neck. “Has anyone ever tied you up and spanked you right?”

My eyes widened as I looked up at him. Honestly, I’d never thought about kinky play. I never imagined enjoying anyone spanking me or tying me up. However, the heat I saw in his eyes made me curious. Suddenly, something I never considered before was at the forefront of my thoughts, and all kinds of pleasurable images flashed into my imagination.

“Kitten?” he prodded once more before nibbling the sensitive spot behind my ear.

I made a sound between a squeak and a squeal when he nipped my ear. The sound was quickly transformed into a moan when he sucked the lobe into his mouth. A satisfying awareness had replaced the pain.

“Answer me, kitten,” he demanded in a voice I didn’t recognize.

Typically, Kyler was easy-going and laid back. I had seen him command his employees. I watched him rally the family, had heard him become stern with Maisie or Clay when they were misbehaving. But I never witnessed this domineering side to him, and I had to admit it was thrilling and sent a slight shiver along my nerve endings.

I was physically quivering at just the tone of his voice.

“No,” I breathed out.

He took a step back. He looked distraught and at a loss for words. He rubbed his hands across his face in distress. I immediately missed his heat and wondered if I’d said something wrong. I analyzed all of our words and realized that he misunderstood me.

He thought he had pushed me too hard, had assumed he had put me in an uncomfortable position. He was attempting to find the right words to apologize to me but didn’t know how to without admitting that tying me up and spanking me may be a kink he wanted to explore with me.

“I’ve never been tied up and spanked, but yes, I want to play,” I admitted candidly.

His eyes widened once more. He took a step forward but not as close as he had been. With his thumb, he caressed my bottom lip.

“I don’t want to do anything with you that may be uncomfortable for you,” he admitted huskily. “It’s not something I need from you, but it's something I enjoy doing from time to time. I’m not into hardcore bondage or whips and such, but I like to dabble in the soft side of it. I would love to tie you down, maybe with some of those scarves of yours, and see my handprint on your soft as cream skin.”

I felt a memory try to force its way into the forefront of my mind, but I pushed it back forcefully. I didn't want to remember Tormentor strapping me down and taking his cigarettes out on my arm. I didn't want his psychopathic tendencies to affect my sexual consciousness or possible proclivities forever.

For a brief moment, I wanted to tell Kyler to tie me down and spank me like he wanted to. Then a small voice within whispered caution. Honesty was important. I had been disgruntled when the guys had decided to withhold their bodies from me, had hated that they had discussions about my sex life without discussing it with me.

Now I realized that maybe they understood me in more ways than I understood myself. I still wished they would have talked to me first. However, I was the queen at shoving my feelings down so deep, a place where they'd fester and find a nasty way of resurfacing, making me spiral.

"I don't want to be tied down, not yet at least," I finally admitted in a whisper before looking down at my feet. "But I want to see if I like getting spanked."

Beside mine, his feet made mine look like they belonged to a child, but really they were perfectly average in size, especially for my height.

He threaded his fingers through my hair and tilted my head back so that I was forced to look into his eyes. "I don't need to spank you. You should never be afraid of anything in my bed."

"I want you to," I said earnestly, knowing I meant it whole-heartedly.

His eyes blazed with hunger. "Get dried off and meet me in the bed with your ass up," he commanded before nipping my bottom lip.

I was helpless to respond as our tongues entwined with each other. I did my own nipping of Kyler's full bottom lip. His growl was almost primal before he turned me around towards the shower door.

"Get in bed with your ass up," he instructed me once more.

He tapped me on the ass with enough force to leave it stinging but not unpleasantly. I shot him a look of desire and fake ire before leaving the shower. I made sure to add an extra swing to my hips, knowing his hungry eyes followed me.

My hands were nearly shaking with excitement, and a little fear. I could see how much this turned Kyler on. I wanted to do this for him, and I wanted to be able to enjoy this, too, for his sake.

I dried off and then quickly moisturized my skin. I already determined I would do my hair on the long bus ride to the competition, so I had little else to do in the morning. My duffle bags were packed. My tracksuit laid on top of my gymnastics bag, and my overnight gear was already stowed away in Lochlann's car in preparation for our little getaway.

I plugged in my phone and hooked it up to my bluetooth speaker. Then I turned off the lights so only the glow from my Bluetooth speaker illuminated the room. *Innocence* by Nathan Wagner was quietly playing through the speaker as I hesitantly crawled onto the bed. I positioned my knees to the edge and braced my hands on the comforter.

It felt like forever before I heard the shower turn off. I was nearly quivering with the anticipation of what was to come. Finally, I sensed Kyler's presence behind me, but not his footsteps. He treaded lightly on his feet for such a large man; I imagined his military training had had a hand in that ability.

A cool breeze caressed my skin from his sudden movement behind me. My skin erupted in goosebumps, and I longed to crawl under the warmth of my comforter but knew I couldn't. He reverently caressed my ass cheeks, and I shivered once more from the heat of his hands.

"Chest down, ass up, and no watching," he commanded before he gently pushed down between my shoulder blades.

I collapsed, my breasts brushing against the plushness of my comforter. I braced my hands next to my face and slightly turned so I could breathe. I wanted to ask him what he was going to do, but I knew better not to.

I felt the stubble of his five o'clock shadow before I felt his lips trail on the inside of my thighs. I gasped as my skin quivered from his touch. My stomach clenched in delicious expectation.

"You're dripping, kitten." Kyler's voice was nearly unrecognizable.

He licked one side of my thigh and then the other, and I moaned as his tongue barely flicked over my vulva.

“Mmm,” he groaned before he continued to tease me with his lips, tongue, and teeth.

I involuntarily started every time he came close to my core.

“Kyler, please,” I begged when I thought I’d had enough.

His first strike came with no warning. I yelped when I felt the sting of his palm against my ass. I felt my body begin to clench with a mixture of pain and panic. Kyler must have sensed this before he leaned forward and swiped my center with a broad stroke of his tongue.

“Patience,” he growled before he pulled away from me once more.

He went back to teasing me as his hand soothed the ache on my cheek. Soon the pain and panic receded, and I was left with a burning warmth. It mirrored the almost painful ache in my lower stomach.

“Baby,” I whimpered involuntarily when I didn’t think I could take it anymore.

My body was literally shaking with need and impatience. I squeaked and groaned when another strike landed on my other cheek. I hissed out, and this time I didn’t tense up with fear. Pleasure quickly replaced my anxiety, knowing he’d soothe the ache and divert my attention. I wasn’t wrong, and he leaned in and circled my clit with his tongue.

“Good girls get what they want when I’m ready,” he rasped. “Nod if you understand.”

I quickly nodded. My fingers clutched my blanket. My back curled up like I was doing the cat pose in yoga.

I heard his body shuffle behind me and felt his lips trail down my spine. I gasped and moaned as he tormented me. His large hand cupped my breast before he pinched my nipple. He rolled it between his fingers, then tugged.

I bit my tongue to keep from begging him for more. I didn’t know how much longer I could take it all. I felt so achy and empty inside. I wanted—no—I *needed* the release only he could give me. I wanted

him to fill me up, to give me the orgasm my body so desperately needed.

The longer he tormented me, the more this feeling of euphoria seemed to seep into me. I was on a sensory overload, and it made me feel like I was almost experiencing an out-of-body encounter. I was only able to whimper and gasp as he continued his onslaught.

I moaned when he lowered back down and buried his face between my thighs. He was making deep noises of satisfaction as he cleaned my thighs with his tongue and then finally latched onto my clit. He created this suction with his mouth and tugged before licking me like I was his favorite ice cream cone.

I mewled and pushed my hips back towards his mouth but was quickly delivered another smack. I didn't feel the pain this time. It was pure pleasure. I knew I was racing towards a mind-numbing, toe-curling orgasm, and I cried out in disappointment when his lips left me. He didn't touch me, and once again, I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from protesting aloud.

The caress of his hands then rewarded me. They traced up my calves, then my thighs. One hand continued to travel to my rear while the other one trailed between my thighs. He slipped one finger inside me. Then he inserted a second one. I gasped when I felt myself stretch around him, feeling the build-up once more. I was so, so close.

I closed my eyes and was panting when he slipped a third finger in.

He was relentless in the pursuit of my orgasm. I was right at the edge before he pulled his fingers from me without warning. I sobbed and collapsed in disappointment against the bed. I had never been this emotional, this needy, in bed, and I didn't know where it was coming from. I felt as if I could physically cry from his denial of my release.

Hot tears burned the back of my eyes.

"What do you want?" he grunted.

"You," I cried out.

He fluidly stood behind me and gripped my hips. He'd usually prepare me for his size, but this time he was ruthless as he slid into me with enough force that I slid against my blankets. I cried out in

relief even though I was vaguely conscious of the nearly painful stretch that I had to go through to accommodate him.

I continued my conscious-yet-separate inner journey as he thrust into me with wild abandon. He gripped my hips so tightly to keep me in place that I was sure I'd bear the marks tomorrow, but I didn't give a damn. My body raced towards the release. It was within my reach.

"Don't you dare come without me," he warned.

I had no control of it as he found my elusive G-spot. The way he angled his body up, I knew *he* knew he'd found it. I screamed out when my orgasm smashed me like a wave− a tsunami, even. I was caught in a riptide as I lost all control of my release. I didn't know which was up and which down. Instead of fighting it, I embraced the feeling.

"Naughty girl." He paused and smacked one ass cheek, then the other.

It was harder than the last few swats, but I barely felt them. My body was still lost in the freefall. I unconsciously backed my hips up to receive Kyler's smacks. I was crying and moaning helplessly.

"Such a good girl," he finally crooned before he was moving once more.

I was stuck between wanting to collapse in exhaustion from sensory overload and crawling out of my skin with the desire to feel more. I wanted to feel it all. I wanted to find another release. I desired to feel pain. I wanted to get lost in it.

He leaned forward and bit my shoulder as he thrust into me. I cried out in pleasure, loving the sting of his teeth. The sound of his grunts, my whimpers, and his skin slapping mine filled the room. My core began to clench. I knew another orgasm was rushing towards me.

"Spank me," I blurted out with no consciousness of my words.

He growled, and he plunged into me harder. I gasped and saw stars behind my closed eyelids. I was on the line of pain and pleasure in the most delicious way. With his hand, he alternated his strikes between both cheeks with just the right amount of force.

I realized then that I completely trusted Kyler. He had guided me effortlessly in this pursuit of finding out my likes and dislikes. He knew when it had been too much. He had soothed me when I

needed it most. He pushed me out of my head and out of my comfort zone. He may have been more dominant and commanding than I had ever seen him, but ultimately it was my pleasure that was important to him.

“Now, kitten, now,” he commanded. “Come for me.”

On command, I cried out as the tight ball of tension unfurled in my stomach. I felt like I couldn’t breathe as my second orgasm hit. It reminded me of when I was younger and how I used to test how long I could sit on the bottom of the pool. I would wait till I saw the black spots burst behind my eyelids; then I would finally surge up, gasping for my next breath, all the while that feeling of rapture danced along edges of dread.

I heard him cry out and felt him fill me up. Kyler’s frantic movements slowed down to a gentle thrusting. He was murmuring words of encouragement and praise as he gently caressed me all over. When he finally slid out of me, I felt the mixture of us immediately. I should’ve felt horrified, maybe even slightly disgusted, but I didn’t feel any of that.

I whimpered, wishing he didn’t have to leave me. I now felt empty. He softly chuckled as if he could read my thoughts, then scooped me up.

“You did good, kitten, so very good,” he crooned near my ear as he carried me to the bathroom.

He made it seem effortless as he leaned inside the shower and turned it on. He sat us on the edge of the tub as the water heated up, me still cradled against him. He then peppered sweet kisses against my face.

“I love you so damn much.” He nuzzled my cheek before kissing the spot behind my ear.

“I love you, too,” I murmured, feeling like a cat basking in the warmth of the sun.

“How are you feeling?” He gently caressed my hair away from my face. His loving, searching eyes met mine. I fell even deeper in love with him. It was so hard not to. He was damn near perfect.

“That was,” I searched for the right words, but there weren’t any to correctly name it, and honestly, my mind was now mush. I

couldn’t even form a coherent thought after those two mind-blowing orgasms. My body still felt separated from reality.

“It was… wow.” I finally whispered, followed by a yawn.

He chuckled once more. “Let’s get you cleaned up and in bed. You have an early morning.”

“Thank you, baby,” I mumbled before kissing his shoulder.

I didn’t know how far I wanted to experiment sexually. However, I could see how Kyler would be a fantastic teacher if I chose to explore more pleasurable avenues. He had already proven himself tonight. He had unlocked a door within that I never knew existed.

“No, thank *you*,” he murmured against my forehead. “I’m a better man with you, Peyton. And just when I think you can’t surprise me anymore, you do, and I fall a little bit more in love with you. I’m such a lucky man to call you mine.”

I was speechless. I didn’t know how to respond. I wanted to find the right words, but I was so tired. My mind was a jumbled mess. I wished I could express myself, but my eyelids were so heavy.

“I—” I began sleepily.

“Shh,” he interrupted, “you need to sleep. I’ll wash us and get us back to bed.”

I trusted him completely.

I nodded against his chest and closed my eyes. I knew I couldn’t argue with him, even if I was capable of it. Soon, I vaguely felt the warmth of the water surrounding me and his hands gently washing me down. Later, not knowing when or how I got there, I was in bed, where I knew I’d end the day with one of the men I loved with my entire being, spooning me from behind. And tonight it was Kyler: my protector, my teacher, my knight who kept the nightmares and fears at bay.

20

Understudy

When my alarm went off the next morning, surprisingly, my eyes opened with no difficulty. I was immediately filled with anticipation and nerves. Today was the day. In a few short hours, I would be on the stage once again. I couldn't wait to get lost in the music and movements. However, my newfound notoriety made me leery of the reaction I was going to receive. I was hoping I would be ignored for the most part. Well, unless I was dancing.

I only wanted to be observed for the dancer I was and not judged or dissected over what had happened to me. I hoped if I stayed with my competition team, I would be left alone for the most part.

I rolled over in bed and winced slightly at the soreness between my legs. I probably should have taken it easy, but, honestly, I couldn't even feel a touch of remorse. Last night was a first for me, and I enjoyed every moment of it. Besides, duets and group numbers were typically after lunch, so I was sure I would be recovered enough by then. I looked over my shoulder and noticed the bed beside me was empty. I frowned and looked towards the bathroom. The lights were off.

I shuffled out of bed to the bathroom and placed some toothpaste on my toothbrush as I turned the sink on. I needed to wash my face, and I wanted the water to warm up while I peed. I brushed my teeth as I sat on the toilet, then gasped at what I was feeling.

I knew Kyler had taken me harder than he ever had last night, so I knew external pain could be another side effect. The soreness within was a new experience, along with the burn on my inner thighs. I peered down and noticed the stubble-burn on my skin. I was torn between pleasure and disgruntlement. The satisfaction remained.

I gently patted myself dry before I finished brushing my teeth. I quickly washed my hands, then my face, and lastly grabbed my hair

rollers. My bus ride would be slightly uncomfortable, but I didn't regret my decision to stay up longer.

I went to grab my bag but noticed it was gone. Kyler must have taken it. Had he been able to sleep? Had he woken from a nightmare and I hadn't heard him? Now I was concerned.

I was about to bound up the steps with renewed energy and concern but quickly reminded myself that it wasn't the greatest of ideas. I grabbed the handrail and climbed at a more sensible pace, instead. I could hear quiet murmurings as I reached the top of the stairs.

When I entered the kitchen, I noticed Kyler and Zane sitting at the breakfast bar. They quietly talked to each other as they ate a large pile of eggs, bacon, and toast.

"Morning, kitten." Kyler looked towards me first. His grin was immense, and he had a knowing gleam in his eyes.

"What are you doing up so early?" I asked him as he slid a travel mug towards me.

He made his way towards me, grabbed my upper arms, and pulled me close before placing a gentle kiss on my forehead. "I wanted to make sure you had your coffee and some food before your big day," he murmured before placing a sweet kiss on my lips.

Warmth filled my chest. I hoped I would never take advantage of Kyler's thoughtfulness. I prayed I would always appreciate the way he took care of me all the time. I'd heard how easy it could be to take others for granted in a relationship, and I was determined never to fall into that trap.

"Thank you." I leaned my forehead against his chest and eyed the food. I didn't want to sound ungrateful, but I could never eat on competition days. I tried to stick to liquids until after my competition.

Zane started to chuckle before he stood up and opened the refrigerator. He began to unload it with fruits and veggies. I realized he was pulling out the ingredients for one of my shakes.

I shot him a playful glare.

"What?" Kyler asked in bewilderment.

"She doesn't like to eat on competition days," Zane explained with a smirk before he reached into the pantry and pulled out one of those Ninja Bullets.

He came back out with the bullet and a canister of protein powder.

“You have to eat.” Kyler frowned. “You still need to gain weight.”

I tried to give him an apologetic smile. “I will eat a ton tonight, but if I eat before I compete, I feel sluggish and bloated.”

“Did you clear this with Bryce?” Kyler crossed his arms over his chest and raised a brow at me. Without removing his eyes from me, he reached over and slid his Gerber multi-purpose tool/knife into his boot. Even when he wasn’t going to work, he carried the tool.

I barely refrained from rolling my eyes at him. “Bryce and I never talked about my nutrition beyond his desire for me to gain weight. I’ve been eating more oversized portions and more frequently throughout the day. I’m gaining weight. This won’t be a setback for me,” I tried to explain patiently. “I understand your concern, but I know how to listen to my body. I’ve been competing at this level for nearly twelve years. When I was twelve or thirteen, I realized that if I ate on competition days, I had to fight nausea throughout the day and I felt… lethargic. And,” I nodded towards his tool, “do you ever go anywhere without that?”

He narrowed his eyes on me, realizing I was trying to distract him.

Seriously, the guy was like a boy scout. He always had a knife or tool on him. I would poke fun at him, but I had seen his tools come in useful at the most random times.

“We all have our quirks,” Zane finally spoke up. “Crew told me how you used to only eat protein and veggies during football season, Ky. You stayed away from all carbs. Peyton’s still getting all the nutrients she needs in her shake,” he reassured him before looking my way. “Ever since Kyler returned from the military, I’ve seen him with one.” He smirked at me, answering my question about the Gerber.

Zane threw a large scoop of vanilla protein powder into the cup. He then added blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, and spinach. He threw in some ice and milk before turning on the machine.

I barely contained my smug smile. Even Kyler couldn't disagree that I was still getting vital nutrients, and it was healthy for me.

"It doesn't hurt to be always prepared." Kyler shrugged as he patted his ankle. "A few bites of eggs, though, kitten," he insisted.

I realized he was trying to use that commanding voice on me once again. It caused flutters in my stomach at the memories that flooded, but I still giggled and shook my head. I took a step forward and cupped his cheek. I stood on my tiptoes and lifted my lips to his ear.

"That voice only works in the bedroom," I whispered before playfully biting his earlobe.

He growled before I was unceremoniously backed into the counter. "You're playing a dangerous game, naughty girl. Do I need to take you downstairs and punish you?"

I shivered as a thrill of excitement slid down my spine. My lady bits were throbbing with arousal while in denial of the rough ride they'd taken last night. If we had time, I'd be requesting another go-round.

"I have to leave in ten minutes," I pouted.

He grunted before he nipped my bottom lip, making me yelp with surprise. "You have no clue the beast you unleashed," he rumbled in my ear.

"Call me Belle then, because I'll tame that beast," I responded saucily.

His eyes were dark with lust as he rubbed his thumb on my bottom lip. "Get out of here before I lose my control." He kissed me with all his pent-up passion. My knees were weak by the time he pulled away.

"Let's go, beautiful," Zane said with a smile in his voice. "Thanks for breakfast again, Ky." He slapped his eggs and bacon on his toast, making a sandwich of it, then grabbed our duffle bags and his travel mug.

"No problem, man." Ky smirked. "I'll see you guys in a few hours."

"Bye, baby." I waved my fingers at Ky, giving him a playful wink.

I barely remembered to grab my coffee cup on the way out.

●

Zane had us settled in the back of the bus. Harry Potter was playing on the tiny screen in front of us, and blankets were stretched across our laps. I had my curlers arranged on the free seat next to me, and I brushed my hair out in sections to wind them around the large curlers.

“Peyton,” I heard my name called from up front.

I looked up. The bus was mostly silent because the majority of the competition teams were asleep. The lights on the bus were on a night setting, so it was dim. Only the occasional flicker of a reflection bounced off the roof of the bus.

Fall had officially set in, so the mornings were darker for far longer. I hated how the sun tripped me up for weeks. It made me think my days were shorter when it was getting dark at five or six at night.

“Here,” I called as I raised my hand.

I saw Anya and Alex stand and make their way to me. My brows knitted in confusion, wondering what they wanted.

Alex was holding three costumes, and that confounded me further.

“We made a change late last night and entered you for a solo,” Anya said without preamble.

I inhaled deeply, choking on my own saliva. Zane immediately handed me his insulated water bottle. I took a long drink.

“Excuse me, but what?” I asked, astonished. “I wasn’t assigned a solo. What−” My voice trailed off as I realized what this was about.

I was such a horrible friend.

I had been texting Renee the last few days, but I never once asked her if she would be here today. Then, I had been so wrapped up in my memories and with Zane that I hadn’t even noticed her absence until that moment.

Anya and Alex nodded as they realized what had finally dawned on me.

“Am I dancing one of my older solos?” I inquired.

Up until this moment, Anya and Alex had seemed very mindful of my recovery process. After last night, I had no doubt my stamina was returning, but even I had doubts that I would be physically able to compete in three numbers today. My mind was more than willing, but my body continued to remind me that I wasn't back at peak performance level. I still had a little way to go to return to my former high-level status.

"You want Peyton to perform in our duet, the group number, *and* a solo," Zane voiced my concerns aloud. "She's still recovering."

"After what I saw last night, I think you're up for it," Anya said in a tone that brooked no argument. "And I would like you to perform the number we practiced at the beginning of the week."

It took me a moment to realize she meant the dance I had been practicing to Ruelle and Fleurie's *Carry You*. Admittedly, I had been practicing it all week since Anya had rearranged it and added it to my choreography. However, I still didn't believe it was competition-worthy. It was a song and dance to gauge my progress. The moment I was able to nail each move with perfection was when I felt I was solo-ready.

"It's not clean," I admitted with defeat.

I would generally be so stoked to perform a solo. It was always an honor to share my passion with the world. Unfortunately, I felt like I would be doing a disservice to my art if I performed it without feeling one hundred percent ready.

In my group number and my duet, I had Zane and the other girls to "hold" me up; I wasn't the sole focus. There were others to distract the judges and audience from any of my fumbles or missteps. It gave me a false sense of security.

"We've been watching you," Alex stated. "You're ready. It's not what you produced in the past, but it's still better than most of the girls performing today. It's been decided, and when we get there, you can try these costumes on and let us know what's the best fit."

I didn't think I fully supported the logic of her thinking. I never wanted to step foot on the stage with anything less than my best; I didn't want to compete just to compete.

"I think it'll be too much for her," Zane said bluntly.

I gave him a wane smile in appreciation.

“She’ll be fine.” Anya patted my hand, gave her son a level look, and went back to her seat in the front of the packed bus. Today the juniors and minis were with us, along with a few parent volunteers.

Alex gave me a sympathetic smile before hanging the costumes on the hook beside our seats and left us alone.

“My dance isn’t ready,” I grumbled to Zane.

He sighed. “Mom can be so stubborn at times.”

I finished putting the last curler in my hair before I leaned into him. “I can be ready by the next competition,” I continued to gripe. “It does have the potential to be a top solo. I’m just not ready now.” I sighed. “I already feel like you’re getting the raw end of the deal dancing with me today. I’m not there yet. My solo and our duet have a high level of difficulty, but at least with our duet, I have you there with me.”

“Well, if anyone can make it work, you can,” Zane said with a kiss to my temple.

“Thanks.” I tried to smile at him, stifling a yawn. “So Albany, huh?”

He nodded hesitantly. “I’m still hoping for a few more schools, but it’s one of the closer Division 1 schools. It’s just the first school that offered me and Crew a place together. I wouldn’t be half the player I am without Crew. I can’t imagine going to college without him.”

I nodded. I was trying really hard to be excited for him, but it was hard, knowing Madison would be there. I also hated knowing that, in less than a year, we’d be going our separate ways. I just hoped our collective relationship was strong enough to see us through all the changes.

“You know you don’t have to worry about Madison with us, right?” Zane seemed to catch my misgivings as he threaded his fingers through mine.

“I know I can trust you guys,” I told him firmly. “I just don’t trust her. She says she’s sorry for the way she behaved with Golden, but I know Madison finds all of you attractive. Knowing Madison, if she thinks we aren’t together, she’ll try to get to you. After all, you guys will be the new star quarterback and defenseman.”

“How do you know I’ll be the new star quarterback?” he teased. “Plus, we’ll still be together. It’ll suck being long distance, but if we already made it through all we’ve been through, the distance will be a walk in a park. That is if you’re willing to do a long-distance relationship.”

I grinned at him, warmed by his reassurance. “Their current quarterback is a senior,” I mockingly sniffed, “and their second-string quarterback threw over ten interceptions in three games this season. The third-string guy would be better as a running back or something like that. You’re gonna be a superstar. I just know it. The recruiter knows it too. After the performance you put on last night, other colleges will know it also. Your record speaks for itself.”

I paused, looking into his eyes. “I wouldn’t mind trying the long-distance thing, but this is college. Do you want to be tied down to just me? What happens if you meet another attractive woman there? Four years is a long time to try to make a long-distance relationship work.”

He gave me a stunned look. “How do you know all that? I’ve never seen you watch football. And I don’t care how many attractive women are out there. All I know is I knew what life without you felt like, and I never want to feel that way ever again. I can’t imagine my life, my future, without you in it, and if it takes a little more work, it’s all worth it because I’m yours, and you’re mine. I love you, Peyton, and I wouldn’t risk this kind of love for anyone.”

My heart melted at his words, and I leaned over and kissed him. “I love you, too,” I admitted. “I don’t want this to end when we go away to college. And,” I added, “I may not watch all the games with you guys, but I’ve watched some of them and I pay attention. Plus, I may have… googled Albany and their players on the way home last night.”

I had spent quite a few days recovering on the couch while the guys watched college football. Lochlann and Golden might not have played or desired to play football, but they got into it. Kyler, Crew, and Zane had it on every Saturday. I wasn’t terribly excited to watch it, but I enjoyed watching how the guys could get into it. The way they rooted for their teams made me believe they had a personal investment in it.

He chuckled softly, his eyes like warm melted chocolate as he looked at me and caressed my cheek. “I love how you learned the game just to relate to us. I like how you made yourself a part of our world. I can’t wait to share the stage with you today.”

I leaned into him once more and yawned. “I can’t wait either.”

“Sleep, beautiful,” he commanded softly. “You have a long day ahead of you.”

He rearranged me onto his lap and repositioned the covers over us. He was warm, comfortable, and soothing all at once. He lightly began to caress my side and hips. It tickled but relaxed me at the same time. I loved how he just got me.

It didn’t take me long to do as he said, and I drifted off to sleep with him holding me to the sounds of Harry Potter drifting in my ears.

●

My stomach was alight with butterflies when we stepped off the bus. There were people as far as I could see. The morning air was crisp, and once again, I could feel the undercurrent of excitement and nerves buzzing in the air.

“It never gets any easier,” Kayley muttered as she stopped beside me. “Does it ever?”

She looked over at me, and I understood completely. I knew she’d started competing at an early age, and it wasn’t until recently that they moved her up to the senior's division, so it was just another level of stress and pressure.

She had been talking to me more over the last few days in Renee's absence. I also knew she and Renee had hit it off on a friendship level. Her kindness and encouraging words had helped Renee come out of her shell more.

They both wanted the leads and loved the stage as much as I did, but instead of being threatened by each other, they bonded over it. It made me grow to like my younger cousin more.

“I won’t lie to you and say it does.” I gave her a rueful smile. “But I let it fuel me. I think the moment I feel overconfident, when the butterflies disappear, it means I have no business competing anymore. We should never be complacent and believe we deserve that first place. We should always be hungry for more.”

“Embrace the nerves,” Zane added. “Then leave it all on the stage.”

I grinned up at him as he placed an arm around my shoulders.

Kayley threw him a grateful grin as well and nodded as if she was just soaking in his words and trying to embrace it.

“Let’s go, team!” Alex said excitedly.

She had a Monster in one hand and a coffee cup in the other, and I swear I could see her vibrating with energy and excitement. I stifled a laugh as I realized she was tweaking high off of caffeine.

“Someone should make her cut back on the caffeine,” Kayley joked as we made our way to the entrance.

She fell in step on the other side of me, and we made our way towards the doors. I noticed people stopping and staring as we approached them, and I kept my eyes trained ahead. I had made my stamp on this world long ago. I recognized past competitors and school teams. However, I knew it wasn’t just my dancing that had people staring at me.

“She’s going to crash hard once she gets off the high,” I joked, attempting to ignore the whispers and people pulling out their phones.

I looked over my shoulder and noticed Sal and Des. They were both super vigilant, and I nearly sighed in relief. I knew they wouldn’t let anyone approach me. I needed to focus on my solo, duet, and group number. I needed to shut out all the outside distractions.

“You passed Bailey up for another solo again?” I heard a woman screech.

Kayley sighed heavily. “Fork me.”

I looked around and saw Kayley and Bailey’s mom, Diane, glaring at Anya. She was a tall, beautiful woman with hazel-green eyes, long auburn hair, and didn’t look like she could be a mother of three, with her oldest being eighteen. Too bad she was a bitch.

I knew she hadn’t been on the bus. In fact, because of the drama she had been bringing to the studio over her ex-husband, she had been pointedly asked not to hang around or chaperone any of our competitions. She had attempted taking her ex-husband back to court to get higher child support because of her job loss, but the

judge hadn't ruled in her favor. In addition, Kayley had permanently moved in with her father.

The judge had allowed Kayley to have a say with where she wanted to live, and she chose her father. Their younger sister was still splitting her time with her father and mother equally. And Bailey's decision to stay with her mother hadn't changed the child support she hoped to receive.

"Bailey is not ready for a solo," Anya said staidly.

"And *she* is?" Diane pointed in my direction. "She's out of shape. She takes way too many breaks. As a medical professional, I don't even think she should be competing at all."

Bailey looked at me smugly as she crossed her arms over her chest. I assumed she hadn't been asleep when Alex and Anya had approached me. It had taken her no time at all to go whining to Mommy dearest.

I rolled my eyes.

"You were a nurse," Starr huffed. "*Were.* You got fired, remember? Now, can you kindly leave? These kids need to focus, and they need to clear their minds."

"I pay good money for my girls to dance," Diane seethed. "Last year Bailey had a lot of solos and the leads. She's only improved since then. I demand that she has that solo today."

"You forget whose school this is," Anya sneered, clearly embarrassed by Diane's behavior. "You're right. She has improved. Bailey," she looked over at Bailey, who was smiling and preening. "Consider yourself on probation."

"What?" Bailey's mouth dropped open in surprise. "What did I do?"

"What?" Diane screeched. "On what grounds are you putting my daughter on probation?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you," Anya sniffed before turning towards the entrance once more, "You signed a contract. Your daughter signed a contract. Her running back to her mother because she's throwing a tantrum over a solo she didn't deserve proves she doesn't want to be a part of a team. There's a reason it's called a competition team. She doesn't understand the meaning of team."

She stalked off, and as a group, we followed. I shook my head. Never a dull day in my life, that was for sure.

21

•

Slipping Away

The nerves were getting to me. This would be my first competition since my return. The whispers, gawking, and phones had been pointed towards me since we signed in and got our dance numbers. It had been too unnerving, so I stayed in our dressing room until Zane and I were up for our duet.

Honestly, it hadn't been too bad hiding away. I had helped Alex get the minis and juniors ready. The minis had been immensely entertaining, and they were the least curious or invasive with my privacy. They all acted so normal around me, and I felt normal because of it.

I really wanted to see Kayley do her solo, but she had been more than understanding with my hiding away. In fact, when she hadn't been out on stage, she and Zane had kept me company. I had received several texts from the others that they were here, cheering me on, but I hadn't ventured out to see them either.

"Ready?" Zane asked me, squeezing my hands in reassurance.

I nodded and tried to smile up at him. He looked so hot in his white button-down shirt and fitted black slacks. His hair was carefully styled. Sometimes I was struck by how fortunate I was to have not one but six highly attractive men attracted to me. This was one of those moments.

He reached over and brushed a strand of my hair off my face. It was down once more with a silver braided circlet firmly secured in my loose curls. I could feel the nerves emanating off him as he ran his hands up and down my waist. His hands were a contrast against the black of my costume.

My costume was liberally laced with sequins in the bodice. Like my other costumes, it had long sleeves. This one had a key-

hole neckline and cut-outs on my shoulders. The skirt flared slightly around my upper thighs. It was classically beautiful.

“How are you?” I inquired in return.

I could see the indecision in his eyes. He hadn’t danced in a competition in years. His father had really done a number on his psyche, and this would be the first time he’d be on the stage since he gave it up.

“We have each other,” I murmured, grabbing his face.

I brushed my lips against his jawline and felt the slight tremor in his body. He was just as petrified to grace the stage once more as I was. The only difference was dance was my passion. Dance was a part of me. He was doing this all *for me.* What a giant leap he was making just for me, and the thought got me out of my head and made my heart leap in my chest at the reminder.

“We have each other,” he repeated as he pulled my hips into his and gently brushed his lips against mine.

I got lost in his gentle caresses and his passionate kiss. Everything seemed to fade away as he pulled me under his spell. All my worries, fears, and doubts slipped away.

“You guys?” Kayley hissed with a laugh as she pointed to the stage.

We looked at each other and laughed as we realized our dance number had already been announced, and the intro to *lovely* by Billie Eilish and Khalid began. We glided onto the stage, and with Zane beside me, it was easy to forget that the venue was packed.

For the first time ever, I didn’t scan the audience or pay attention to the judges’ expressions. I got lost in our movements. I felt all of Zane's touches acutely. Our eyes were locked onto each other every time we were facing each other.

When it came time for our very technical, challenging lift, I didn’t think about my recovering body or how I wasn’t quite “back” yet. I was able to shut it all out and just trust Zane, remaining calm though-out.

When I leaped into his arms, I didn’t try to stop the natural momentum. He tossed me up into a turn so effortlessly. He extended his arms above his head, bracing my waist securely. He effortlessly

held me, and I looked down into his eyes. My eyes widened, trying to convey my joy.

He didn't smile with his lips when I gripped his shoulders, but I saw the smile and pride in his eyes as he looked up at me. He gently squeezed my waist, and I wished I could whoop with delight. I hadn't landed this lift on the first try since my return.

I extended my leg into a perfect split as Zane steadied me with one arm and spun me. When it was time to dismount, his hands seemed to be more intimate, and unlike practice, he even trailed his lips down my neck to my shoulders before he spun me back out.

We separated and did our turns before he returned to me and embraced me from behind. Our bodies swayed together, and as the finishing notes resonated from the speakers, he braced my lower back and lowered me into a near backbend. He curved his body around mine, then lowered his head to my chest, staring across the auditorium. I dug my hands into his hair, cradled the back of his head, and kissed the top of his head.

The lights dimmed, and it was silent for a few beats. I could feel Zane's rapid heartbeat against my stomach. I could see the rise and fall of his chest. I could hear the small puffs of air he expelled, trying to catch his breath. I knew I was just as winded. We had given it our all and then some.

Regardless of the outcome, I knew we couldn't have performed any better. Zane had added an intimacy into the dance we hadn't practiced, and I had connected with him on a level I knew very few partners ever achieved.

The clapping, whistles, and cheers were nearly deafening after a few seconds of silence. Zane lifted me back up, and we grinned at each other, breaking character. We were no longer struggling lovers. We were just us. He took my hand and pulled me in close. He brushed a kiss against my cheek down to the corner of my lips before he led me towards the front of the stage. We took our bows and then turned to exit the stage.

I had expected to see Anya and Starr on our return from the stage. I hadn't expected to find them both crying. Anya moved forward, and in turn, took our cheeks in her hands, kissing them soundly.

“Beautiful, so beautiful,” she finally murmured.

“Mama,” Zane said with a mixture of concern and teasing before pulling her into an embrace.

“You guys lit the stage on fire,” Starr enthused as she brushed her tears away. “The chemistry between you two is unlike anything I have ever seen, and I’ve been in this world for over thirty years. You guys were amazing during practice, but that… that was something else entirely! You took it to a whole new level.”

My eyes smarted with my own tears. It was such a surreal feeling when I evoked such a strong reaction in people simply from dancing. It was just another reminder of why I was so passionate about it. I wanted to portray a story with music and movement, hoping to draw people into it. For those few minutes, I wanted everything else to fade away and provide them an escape.

“The next competition is in two weeks,” Anya seemed to pull herself together. “What are you doing next?”

Zane and I looked at each other and laughed. I think we both anticipated her demand. She made it no secret that she missed seeing Zane dance, and we kind of suspected that she wouldn’t be satisfied with just one performance.

“We’ll work on it, Mama,” Zane promised her with a kiss on the cheek.

He smirked at me before capturing my hand once more. I could see the confidence and pleasure he felt. He might have lost his joy in dance, but he had found it once more with me.

“Yes!” Anya and Starr enthused.

“Now, go get changed and ready for your next routine, Peyton.” Starr smiled, embracing Zane and me together.

We laughed and turned toward the dressing room.

“I love you,” I whispered in his ear as we walked away.

“I love you more,” he murmured in return.

My eyes automatically drifted closed as he brushed a sweet kiss on my temple. This was another moment in my life I wished I could stuff in a box and pull out whenever I wanted to remember a monumental moment. The joy and love I was feeling dashed all the darkness that had been clinging to the edges of my consciousness since my return.

“That was so beautiful, guys,” Kayley enthused, wiping her eyes of tears.

She was already dressed in the costume for our group number, and I felt no envy or jealousy. She was taking the lead since Renee couldn’t be here today. She deserved it, and I knew she was going to rock it. Unlike her sister, she worked and worked to be a better dancer than she was yesterday, the day before, and so on.

“Not you, too!” I teased her as I accepted her embrace.

“Let’s get dressed.” She looped her arm through mine, and we began to walk towards the dressing room.

Zane took my other side, and I was thankful for their presence as more dancers, choreographers, and instructors milled around us. The civic center was much larger than most of the venues we’d competed at. Therefore, more people were allowed to be backstage. They still kept control of it so it didn’t become out of hand, though.

There were some competitions I had attended where only the performer and the next performer were allowed backstage at once. Sometimes we had to stand in line waiting in a hall until the event coordinator would let us know we were next.

“Stand by, beautiful.” Zane smirked. “We have a little while yet before your group number, and the guys are threatening castration if I don’t swing you out towards them.”

I looked over my shoulder and saw that Sal and Desmond weren’t too far behind. They had become so good at blending in; I’d forgotten about their constant presence.

I raised an eyebrow at Zane. “Maybe Paxton or Golden, but I doubt the others are as adamant.”

He chuckled and nodded. “Paxton’s threatening to hunt us down unless I bring you out.”

I laughed and followed his lead to a side door and out into a small, obscure lobby, where I noticed only a handful of people roamed around. A set of double doors opened on the opposite of the hall, and my smile grew wide when my family poured in.

I was overcome with emotions when I realized they came bearing gifts again. I couldn’t contain the giggle that escaped my lips when Paxton and Golden thrust a bouquet of beef jerky and a basket of candy towards Zane. Zane's head tilted back with a loud guffaw as

he realized that they had given him unique bouquets in lieu of flowers.

I reached over and yanked a Kit-Kat bar from his candy basket, grinning smugly at him.

“You guys don’t have to come with flowers every time,” I protested as Maisie, Hope, Joy, Faith, and the twins came forward with a large bouquet of lilies.

I leaned down and bestowed kisses on each of their cheeks. “Thank you, guys.” I smiled at them.

Even the reminder of why they were in our lives couldn’t tamper the euphoric high I was riding.

The kids were doing so well. Surprisingly enough, Maisie was delighted with being homeschooled. As predicted, she and Faith were nearly inseparable. The children had adapted to the new situation rather effortlessly.

“You were so beautiful,” Joy said, looking starstruck. “Grandpa said we could start dance on Monday. Can you teach us?”

I looked at Grandpa, and he shrugged and grinned. “I think it’s time they began transitioning to more normalcy,” he explained.

I smiled down at Joy. “I don’t really teach classes, but maybe I can help you out now and then?”

She seemed satisfied with my explanation as I stood to my full height. Kyler sauntered forward, and I knew from his expression that he was full of mischief. My belly quivered remembering the other side of him that I got to see last night. I could still feel the residual effects of our activities.

The way his eyes darkened, I had a feeling he knew where my train of thought had headed, because a wicked smirk curved at his lips.

“I forgot the flowers, but I figured this was much needed.” Kyler held out a large smoothie towards me. “You need to consume extra calories *even if* it’s in liquid form. Never know when you might need them.”

I felt my face warm at his innuendo, and I prayed it went over Grandpa’s—and everyone else's—head. Hopefully, they assumed Kyler was just concerned about my underweight body and not because of what we had done last night.

I jokingly rolled my eyes before accepting it. “Thanks, Dad,” I mockingly teased him.

I placed the straw against my lips and took a long draw of the cold liquid. I had to admit the green juice didn’t look that appetizing, but it was delicious. I was also surprisingly hungry.

I heard a throat clear, and my eyes slightly widened as David stepped forward with an obscenely large bouquet of roses. I was surprised by his presence. I knew he wanted to try being a father to me, but I never expected him to take the long drive to watch me dance.

“You guys looked great up there,” he murmured, almost uncertain as he handed me the flowers.

He had shown me such a different side of him lately, and I had to admit it was wearing me down. It made me want to forgive him and overlook the fact that he had never been in my life up until now.

“Thank you.” I took the flowers, and for the first time ever, I embraced him by my own volition. I could feel that I had surprised him by the action as much as I had myself. He almost seemed reluctant to let me go when I took a step back.

“No, thank you.” He sounded almost emotional.

I wasn’t sure how to process the feelings that were rioting in me right then. I was thankful that my guys seemed to pick up on this as they started taking their turns embracing me and telling Zane and me how great we looked out there.

“I can’t wait to show you some of the shots I took,” Paxton enthused as he held up his camera. “I’m hoping to mess around on Photoshop with a few of the shots.”

“I can’t wait to see them,” I told him honestly.

Golden was the next person to draw me into a hug. He buried his head into my neck. “You make me speechless when I watch you dance,” he admitted as he gently swayed his body against mine. “I knew you were nervous today, but I couldn’t see any of that on the stage.”

My heart fluttered with warmth at his words. “Thank you, Golden.” I reached up on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek.

“Pey Pey!” Clay loudly protested, reminding me of his presence.

I laughed and found him in Lochlann's arms. I stepped forward, using him as an excuse to embrace both him and Lochlann.

"Beautiful as always," Lochlann murmured as he slipped one of his arms behind my back.

"Me go!" Clay launched himself towards me.

"Oh, buddy, I'm sorry," I crooned as I pushed some of his curls off of his face. "Peyton has to go back and dance a couple more times."

"A couple?" Lochlann's brows knitted in concern.

I gave him a rueful smile and shrugged. "Renee wasn't ready to compete today, so that left a solo open. Anya and Alex asked me to dance the other one."

"Are you sure you should be?" Kyler grumbled.

I sighed and held up my hands. "We'll see."

"She was more 'voluntold,'" Kayley chimed in while Faith, Hope, Joy, and Maisie stared at her in awe. As I was hugging the guys, the girls had recognized her from her solo and peppered her with questions. The twins were still painfully shy and were clinging to Grandpa's leg like a lifeline.

I tilted my head, agreeing with her unique statement.

"I don't think you're ready to push yourself that hard." Lochlann frowned.

"I agree, but you know how mom is," Zane said ruefully.

"Should I go speak to her?" David spoke up.

I shook my head. I understood their concern, but I couldn't, or wouldn't, go against Anya's wishes. She really was the best instructor I'd ever had. I didn't want to struggle against her too much.

"Don't push yourself to injury," Grandpa warned.

I nodded in agreement. "Anya's aware that I probably won't even place. She understands I'm not where I would like to be or even close to where I was. I don't want any setbacks, so I'll listen to my body," I assured them. I had the same misgivings, but I would much rather have their support. I didn't need them adding to the doubts I already had, which could mess with my head as much as self-doubt.

"We should probably head back," Zane gently reminded me. "You have to get dressed for group."

I nodded and pulled away from Lochlann, kissing Clay's cheek as I patted his back.

“Thank you for coming again.” I smiled at everyone. “I’ll try to revisit you before the competitions are over with.”

I took a few steps away before I realized I hadn’t seen Crew. Turning around, I stopped and called out to their retreating backs. “Where’s Crew?”

A funny feeling of foreboding entered my stomach. *Something’s not right.*

I hoped I wasn’t being too overly paranoid, but I liked to listen to the little voice within that talked to me from time to time.

I noticed Kyler, Lochlann, and Golden exchange a look.

“He had to step outside,” Kyler said. “Apparently, a few more schools have been in contact with him, and he’s gathering as much information as possible.”

I could see that the guys weren’t happy about that. But why? Did they know something I didn’t? I knew Crew wasn’t the most forthright with his feelings and thoughts, but his college plans were something Zane and he always talked about.

I looked over at Zane, and he seemed just as surprised as I was by this information. I was under the impression they had been discussing their options with each other in the hopes that they could go away to school together. Plus, they had already started making plans to visit Albany together next weekend.

The explanation still didn’t sit right with me. It wasn’t like Crew talked on the phone for any length of time, especially over a topic that only affected him.

“Kayley, Peyton!” Alex sounded harried as she burst through the doors. “Let’s go. I’ve been looking everywhere for you two.”

“Sorry,” Kayley squeaked and scampered away.

I wanted to probe further. I looked at the guys, then Alex. With a heavy sigh, I knew this discussion would have to be tabled. I would have to wait until I saw Crew and ask him if he was entertaining other schools. Still, this new decision seemed to be coming out of left field.

“See you guys later.” I waved before hurrying after Kayley and Alex.

●

My body hurt. I was tired. I was hungry. I didn't feel like myself at all. And for the first time ever, I wanted this competition to be over with. Even with the nerves, I usually thrived on competition days. Now that it was my turn to dance my solo, I was over it.

I pulled out my phone and decided to let Paxton know that I was dedicating this dance to him. I had to dig deep and make it a good one for him.

Me: Psst. Getting ready to go on. This one's for you ;)

His response was almost immediate.

Soulmate: Really?! I can't wait to watch you kill it.

I smiled before handing my phone to Kayley.

"Can you hold this?" I asked her.

"Sure can." She grinned and slipped it into her tracksuit.

Four more performances, a short recess, and the award ceremony stood between me and the rest of the weekend. I was starting to feel the excitement of spending some alone time with Lochlann. Just the two of us with no family, friends, and—hopefully—no drama to bother us.

Lochlann said he'd secured a smaller cottage for Salvatore and Desmond. It was on the property we were renting. They weren't even going to step foot in the secluded cabin we would be occupying. Lochlann still wouldn't tell me where we were going, and honestly, I was okay with that. I liked surprises.

The moment the awards ceremony was over, Grandpa had booked us a reservation at an exclusive restaurant. I didn't want to take the time away from Lochlann, but I felt like it was the least I could do for everyone since they traveled a good distance to see me perform only three times over an eight-hour or so period.

Those eight hours were a long time for *me*, and I didn't have a gaggle of children with me to take care. So, I knew it had to have been a long day for them, too. The few times I was able to sneak to see them, I could tell they were getting a little restless. At one point, Golden sent pictures of the twins sound asleep on Kyler and David. Clay was passed out on Lochlann, and Paxton was lying on the auditorium floor coloring with the rest of the kids.

I heard my number announced, and I took a deep breath. I rubbed my sweating hands against my moss green and gold

costume, adjusted the mock collar against my throat, and then made sure my hair was tightly secured.

I tried to shut out all the extra white noise in my head. There had to be a reason why Crew hadn't answered my text. But I reminded myself that he was known for forgetting to respond to my texts. He had a lot going on right now, and I shouldn't expect him to indulge me at every turn.

When I heard Ruelle and Fleurie's *Carry You* begin, I walked out onto the stage. I tried to embrace the feelings I felt when I first listened to the moving lyrics, wanting to convey my desire to be the rock Paxton needed at times.

I wanted to give him back his shine. I wanted to be the wind to help him fly once more.

My limbs trembled as I did a chasse, step, and then leaped into a *grand jetè*. I immediately knew my landing wasn't going to be clean. I felt the wobble in my supporting leg. When I landed with a stumble, I kept my face carefully blank and tried to recover the best I could. I heard some of the tittering and sounds of sympathy from the audience and carefully concealed the grimace I felt.

Inwardly, I was berating myself and confirming my belief that I wasn't ready to take on three dances in one competition—not yet, at least. Outwardly, I kept my emotions in check. The only feelings I emoted pertained to my acting skills for the music.

My legs were quaking as I grabbed my leg for the reverse turn, and I silently prayed I could nail the rest of my moves with zero mistakes. After my third turn, I knew I couldn't complete the next three turns, so I improvised by adding a few more floor work techniques. By the time the music drew to a close, my whole body was shaking, and I felt a lot more winded than I typically would.

I bowed before exiting the stage. Tears of self-beratement and disappointment burned the back of my eyes, but I refused to allow them to fall. I shook out my quaking limbs and met Kayley in the wings.

"It wasn't a big deal," she immediately reassured me. "The rest of the dance was flawless."

I emitted a sound close to a laugh and sob. I looked up and exhaled a deep breath. "I wasn't ready," I said in defeat. "I should

have begged them to give someone else the solo."

"You're going to place regardless," Kayley insisted moments before Zane made his way to my side.

He pulled me in close and kissed the top of my head. "Even with a small mistake, you were breathtakingly beautiful."

I shook my head. "That song was Paxton's. I failed," I muttered.

"He wouldn't have noticed the difference. In fact, I'm sure the rest of us won't hear the end of it for weeks." He ran a soothing hand up and down my back, and with his other hand, he palmed my cheek, forcing me to look into his eyes. "He'll make sure to let us all know that was *his dance*." He grinned.

I chuckled forlornly, knowing it was true.

Paxton might not have known the difference, but I knew. I wanted it to be perfect, and it hadn't been.

Zane led me towards the stairs, and I immediately felt disappointment once more when I saw Anya and Alex waiting for me.

"A small deduction," Anya said without preamble. "You'll gain the points back in technique and difficulty."

"It was a bad mistake." I picked at the gold braided band under my breast.

"There were a lot of mistakes all around today in the senior solo division," Alex said encouragingly.

"I can't remember the last time I made a mistake like that." I blew out another breath, willing the tears back once more.

I knew I was hardest on myself and my worst critic. But that was because I knew what I was capable of. I had been dancing for years, and yes, I had received plenty of deductions over the years, but they were usually trivial. Most people would have never noticed if my turn-out wasn't right or if my arms didn't have flawless form. Generally, any mistakes I made were just a judge nitpicking for an error. With this one, though, I had handed them the fault on a silver platter.

"You still represented my school beautifully," Anya said, comforting me as she cupped my cheek.

I knew it was pointless to continue this argument, that they would continue reassuring me, *and* that I would continue to berate myself. I needed to shake it off and work even harder next time. By the next competition, I'd feel almost one hundred percent. I had never competed in such a… fragile state like this before.

"Thank you," I said automatically. "I'm going to get into my warm-ups."

"Go, get comfortable." Alex patted my shoulder.

I nodded and began walking to the dressing room.

"Peyton," Anya called behind me.

I turned slightly, not wanting her to see how raw my emotions were.

"I'm proud of you. You're a strong woman, and you only proved it further today." Anya's voice carried despite the chaos surrounding us.

I attempted to grin and nod at her. I knew I had bounced back reasonably well, but it didn't stop me from my self-flagellations.

●

"Is dance your future?" David asked me as we walked towards the vehicles.

"Yes." I nodded. "I have a few auditions lined up in the next few months for schools in New York City. And I'll probably take a few online classes for business administration," I added.

"Business?" he inquired.

I sighed. I was trying. Honestly, I was. But I was so tired, and I just wanted to decompress and brain dump the last few hours. The roller coaster of emotions was exhausting in and of itself. The team had placed second in our group number. Zane and I received first 'overall' for duets, and I had placed fourth in my solo.

I didn't feel like making small talk, but I was attempting to humor David.

"I figured once I'm not able to dance any longer, I could find a school to choreograph and teach at," I explained. "Maybe, eventually, I'll open up my own school that provides scholarships for students like I once was. Priscilla initially enrolled me in a Parks and Rec program, but once that ended, she decided she couldn't afford for me to go beyond the intro classes. However, the school that had

the contract with the Parks and Rec must have seen something in me, so they worked with her.

“The scholarship covered my lessons, but Priscilla was responsible for my competition fees and costumes. The school had some donors that would help from time to time with those costs. Priscilla later told me that she had racked up steep credit card bills to pay for the additional costs that I couldn’t get.” I shrugged. “So, I’d like to find boys and girls that were in similar situations like me and give them a larger helping hand. I don’t want them to worry about anything if they have the drive and determination to become better dancers. They don’t even have to want a future in it. For some of the scholarship kids, it was an escape for them. It was the only thing they could really rely on. I want to give them the same stability I had needed.”

David nodded. “It sounds like you have a great head on your shoulders and a solid plan.”

I felt a small tug in my chest over the admiration and pride I saw in his eyes.

Was this how it felt to have a father? Sean hadn’t even pretended to attempt the role. Ever. Mickey was the closest thing to a father-figure I’d had growing up. It felt weird to have my biological father taking an interest in me suddenly.

I heard my name being called, and I turned out of habit instead of conscious thought.

“Peyton Delaney?” the man yelled.

Sal and Des immediately waylaid the man running towards me, and I turned forward again, relieved in their presence. I sighed and looked back over my shoulder in exasperation. For the most part, I had been left alone today.

Lochlann and Kyler immediately stepped closer to me. The other three security specialists closed in around our whole group. They were on high alert as they ushered us quickly to our vehicles.

I watched as Sal and Des stood in front of the man and murmured words to him. Lochlann placed a comforting hand on my lower back and guided me towards his car. As I was climbing into Lochlann’s Audi, I realized I recognized the smartly dressed, good-looking man. Recognition slowly sunk in, and I stepped out quickly.

“Grandpa!” I ran over to him. “Did you ever check into Martin Brady?”

Martin Brady had been at my last competition. He had given me his business card and was going to send me paperwork to audition for a music video. Grandpa had been skeptical of the offer and wanted to check his credentials first.

Grandpa looked at me, puzzled at first, but then I saw realization dawn in his eyes. “Ah, yes, his credentials checked out. Stay here.” He patted my arm and walked towards Sal, Des, and Mr. Brady.

I realized the guys had put the children in the vehicles and were now standing around me. They looked at me expectantly, and I gave them a rueful smile. I didn’t want to show my excitement in case it was more negative news, but I felt the anticipation tingling up my spine.

As I waited, I thought of Crew, who hadn’t been waiting for me when I rejoined my family. Kyler told me that he had to return home because the coach had reminded him that he was supposed to be assisting him with the junior-high’s football team today.

Crew had told me how Coach expected the guys to participate in community service; it was a condition for remaining on the team. Zane had been able to use the dance studio as community service credits since he wasn’t technically paid for his time there. Crew didn’t have the same luxury, so Coach had given him the option to assist the junior-high school football team from time to time.

Yes, they did have a big game tonight, but I didn’t understand why Crew was just informing us about it now. It wasn’t like him to forget important things like that. My gut was still telling me something wasn’t right.

“Is that the man that wanted you to try out for a music video?” Zane finally inquired.

I nodded. “Grandpa said he checked him out. He’s legit. I just don’t know why he’s here again. He made it sound like the music video would be filming around this time. They should have already done the auditioning process by now.”

“Who knows, maybe they didn’t find the man or woman they really wanted,” Paxton said encouragingly.

I smiled and nodded, hoping that was the case. I thought it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Never did I imagine being scouted at a dance competition on my own. My previous school had a similar situation occur, and I had thought that was a one-off invite for the school as a whole. Now, when the opportunity was knocking once more, I couldn't believe my luck. But again, I didn't want to get too excited just yet.

Grandpa and Mr. Brady started heading towards as, and I felt myself physically vibrating with anticipation. Golden slid up beside me and placed a reassuring arm around my shoulders. I looked up at him and attempted to give him a grateful smile.

"Hello, Peyton, it's great to see you again." Mr. Brady smiled at me, then looked at Zane. "And it's my understanding you're Zane Chapman? I don't recall seeing you at the last competition."

Zane accepted his outstretched hand and shook it. "I just started dancing again," he explained briefly.

"I see, I see." Mr. Brady nodded before turning towards me. "I'm gonna cut to the chase since I know it's been a long day for you, but I would really like for you to come to the city on Monday and do an audition for that music video I spoke to you about previously."

"You haven't already cast the role?" I asked in surprise, barely containing my excitement.

Mr. Brady grimaced. "We have," my face must have fallen because he quickly amended with, "Let's just say the lead girl that was cast has given us reason to doubt her abilities to complete the video to our expectations, and our male lead landed himself into the hospital, so…" He looked over at Zane. "I was hoping you'd come as well. It's just for one day, initially. I called our choreographer to get you up to speed, and if she likes you and the band's manager takes a shine to you both, work begins next Monday."

"And how long does the actual music video take?" Zane asked with a frown.

I was filled with mixed emotions. I didn't know how the school would take it if Zane and I missed any more days of school. However, I was excited with the thought Zane would be there with me. This would be my first "real" job, and if he could be there with me, it would be beyond amazing.

“Counting Monday? Two days, three days tops,” Mr. Brady stated with a kind smile. “We’ll put you up in your own rooms. Food will also be provided for on set, all day.”

“I can talk to Principal Fanning,” Lochlann murmured as if he understood part of my dilemma. “You’re both on top of your studies, so it shouldn’t be an issue.”

“I think I’ll call my mother, and I need to tell Coach I’ll be missing some practices,” Zane said hesitantly but then looked at me and smiled. “But three days shouldn’t be too big of an issue. Do you have a contract I can review?”

“I already sent it to my lawyer,” Grandpa replied, giving Zane a delighted smile. “He’ll review it, and if it all pans out, we’ll let you know our decision no later than tomorrow. I have all your contact information.”

I hadn’t thought about contracts and all that jazz. I’m glad Grandpa and Zane had clearer heads because I was filled with too much elation to think clearly.

“Perfect.” Mr. Brady smiled, holding out his hand once more. Grandpa shook it first before Zane, and I did as well. “I hope to be seeing you both bright and early Monday morning.”

“Did that really just happen?” I grinned as Mr. Brady walked off.

Kyler grinned. “It did, and you deserve it. Now, let’s go eat. I’m starving.”

I moved back towards Lochlann’s car with an extra hop in my step.

22

•

Unraveled

“Hey, love, we’re here,” Lochlann said softly as he gently shook me.

I blinked for a few seconds, attempting to get my bearings. Everything came rushing back to me, and I sat up abruptly.

“I fell asleep,” I moaned. “I’m so sorry.”

Grandpa took us to this amazing Indian restaurant. They served their food family-style, so several large platters had come out to the table at once. We got to try a little bit of this and a little bit of that. I had my fill of all their delicious curries and naan bread. I had to have eaten my body weight in naan alone.

The moment we got back to the car, Lochlann had turned up the heat, both in the car and my seat. I remembered feeling sleepy, but I also remembered us talking. Had I fallen asleep mid-conversation? How rude was that?!

Lochlann chuckled softly and shook his head. “You had a long day, and I didn’t mind. Although, I think the boys have been blowing up your phone. I’ve seen Paxton’s name pop up several times.”

I laughed and shook my head. “I am not surprised. He was sulky that Clay ‘took his spot’ at dinner, and he’s trying to convince me to let him go to the city with Zane and me. I really am sorry I fell asleep on you. I feel like we get so little time together as it is, and I just wasted *your* time on sleep.”

He leaned over the center console and framed my face with his hands before dragging his nose against my cheek and caressing his lips with mine. I felt just the tip of his tongue sweep across my lips before he was pulling away. I blinked up at him, disappointed by the abrupt end.

He chuckled once more. “It’s alright. If you’re not too tired, I have dessert waiting for us inside. If not, we can always just retire to the room and watch a movie until we fall asleep.”

I looked at the clock and realized it was almost eight p.m.

I laughed and shook my head. “You wouldn’t be disappointed if we didn’t have sex? It seems to be a waste to spend all this money just for us to hang out and sleep.”

He delved his hands into my hair and pulled me close once more. This time when my lips softened against his firm insistence, his tongue tangled with mine. With each second that passed, a warmth spread in the pit of my stomach, and his kiss became more demanding. We were breathless when he finally pulled away.

“This weekend isn’t about sex, Peyton,” he said, making sure to maintain eye-contact with me. “I just wanted you to myself for a little while. Where we’re not changing dirty diapers, putting kids to bed, making dinner, cleaning, or being interrupted by the others.”

My heart softened at his words. Our lives were always on an ever-constant treadmill, with no sign of slowing. Even when I was recovering, life hadn’t stopped. We still had children to care for, laundry to wash, cleaning, cooking, and when we had any extended period of non-interruptions, it seemed only to occur when we were sleeping.

But even then, Clay was known to wake in the middle of the night from time to time, and Maisie was in that stage where she had to get up several times for any excuse to prolong the inevitable. She wanted some water, an extra hug, inquired about her lunch the next day, or was reminding us if something was occurring at school. It was all stall tactics, but it happened on the regular.

“Thanks for making this weekend possible, Loch. I wish we could have stayed for more than a day, though.” I leaned in to brush my lips across his.

“I’m just glad you agreed and I can finally take you out to breakfast tomorrow morning without the whole town beginning to talk,” he admitted. “I can hold your hand while we check out the town. I can kiss and hug you whenever I want to as well.” He smirked.

We had already determined to keep our relationship secretive in public. We didn’t go out together if it was perceived as a date. The few times we went to the grocery store or picked up food, we always had someone else with us or the children− not to forget one or both

of my bodyguards. I wanted to make sure he was well established in his schooling before giving the townies more fodder.

I abruptly pulled back and laughed when I noticed Desmond and Sal were standing right outside Lochlann's window with their duffel bags thrown over their shoulders.

"Show me this amazing place." I smiled as I turned to grab my door handle.

"I can't wait until you see it tomorrow morning," he said before opening his door. "The views here are amazing."

I stretched and yawned as I got out of his car. The cold air made me shiver slightly. I scanned our surroundings and saw nothing but trees. For a brief, horrifying moment, my memories threatened to suffocate me. Memories of another cabin secluded in the wilderness.

I had to take in some deep, calming breaths. Paxton and I had been working on this. I anticipated this trigger, so I had asked him to take walks in the woods with me with our cameras− once I was permitted to leave the bed. The woods surrounded my house, my grandfather's, and Lochlann's.

I had a feeling if I were to space out for a moment I could easily slip into my memories. I didn't want the rest of my life to be determined by those monsters. I didn't want to live in the suburbs or city just because I gained a fear of the woods.

"Peyton," Lochlann said quietly but firmly before he placed an arm around my shoulders and drew me in close. I could see him mentally berating himself. "Will this be okay? Because we can go back into town and rent a bed and breakfast, if not."

He must have retrieved our bags from the trunk while I got lost in my head. He softly rubbed my arms and kissed the top of my head. I closed my eyes and shook off the irrational fear before I looked up at him and grinned. I was thankful that he was highly perceptive. I also didn't want him feeling guilty for choosing a secluded location without realizing it could be a trigger for me.

Hell, I was still finding out there were some triggers that I couldn't anticipate. It was like my mind was filled with landmines, and with one false step, anything could make it blow. I had nearly gone

the whole day without thinking about my ordeal, and I foolishly assumed I could continue avoiding my memories.

I tried to force conviction in my words as I looked up at the cabin. “It’s going to be perfect.” I quickly noted all of the differences and promptly tried to find ways to cope with the memories without them ruining the rest of my night.

This cabin is not the same, I mentally rebuked myself.

I realized the quaint cabin was newer despite the faux rustic appearance. The walkway leading to the front door had solar lights. Quirky characters like solar gnomes, frogs, and fairies provided additional lighting among the white stones and bushes. The front porch was illuminated with large bulbs strung across the rafters. There were even ceiling fans installed over well-cared-for rocking chairs and hammock.

“It’s beautiful,” I informed Lochlann.

I was relieved to realize I was able to pull myself back from the ledge. I didn’t want anything to ruin our short getaway. I wanted another good day like today.

Actually, I was still floating on a slight high. After placing so high today, seeing my family out there supporting me. And, of course, I couldn’t forget about Monday when Zane and I would head to the city to audition for a music video.

Anya had been more than supportive and excited by the offer. The money we would make off the job was an additional incentive. None of us even cared who the music video was for or even if we liked the artist. We were just excited about the opportunity that had been handed to us.

I physically felt Lochlann relax beside me. He looked satisfied by my answer and turned my face to meet his gaze. He seemed to be weighing my words and must have seen the truth in my eyes. The excitement started entering my soul once more. This was my first official “date” with Lochlann.

“I texted you the code to your place,” Lochlann informed Salvatore and Desmond. “I made sure that your refrigerator and pantry are fully stocked. Help yourself to whatever you wish. I even had the manager put a case of beer in the fridge as well. We’ll be good from here.”

Sal looked at me, and I smiled, giving him a reassuring nod. I appreciated how Sal seemed to respect my input and decisions. Plus, it helped that I never saw him express any judgment towards my situation with the guys. I was pretty confident he had filled Des in as well because the man no longer looked at us like he was busy trying to dissect us. Des never did it rudely, but you could definitely tell he was forever confused and baffled, especially in the beginning when he'd witnessed our interactions at home.

"We'll let you know when or if we plan to head into town tomorrow morning," I informed them.

Lochlann already explained that he was going to allow me to decide what we were doing. He had our cabin stocked with plenty of food, but just in case I wanted to eat out instead of one of us cooking, we had that option. He also said the town was a huge tourist attraction and if I desired to explore it, he'd be happy to indulge me.

For now, I was going to wing it. Maybe later I would decide to stay-in until we had to leave tomorrow afternoon. However, if I changed my mind, I had packed my wig. I kind of liked the idea of going out in public with some anonymity.

"Sounds good. Night, Lochlann and Peyton." Sal grinned and waved before leaving.

I barely noticed the cottage approximately a hundred yards up on a slight hill. They must have parked first and walked over, because I hadn't spotted their vehicle behind ours. I could smell smoke on the crisp night air and inhaled deeply. I loved the smell of chimney smoke, especially when the nights got colder.

"Should we do a walkthrough in the cabin just in case?" Des frowned at Sal's retreating back.

"If you wish." Lochlann held his hand out towards our cabin.

I had to bite back a sigh. I just wanted to hole away with Lochlann until we decided if we wanted to emerge from our nest for the next sixteen or so hours.

Lochlann linked his hands with mine and led me to the front door of the cabin. He pushed in a code in a lockbox before retrieving a key. He inserted the key and opened the door. He allowed Des to go in and inspect the cabin as we patiently waited on the porch.

I relaxed into the curve of his body as I looked around.

Des came out less than five minutes later. “It’s clear. Keep in touch if you need us. Goodnight.”

I smiled and shook my head. I was glad he took his job seriously. However, it was annoying at times. I longed for the day when personal security was no longer necessary.

“Thanks, Des,” Lochlann replied. “Night.”

Lochlann never seemed to be bothered by my Shadows. If anything, it seemed like they brought him comfort. He never seemed inconvenienced by their presence and even went out of his way to better accommodate them at times.

Lochlann gently guided me through the open door, and I immediately smiled at its appearance. It wasn’t large by any means, but it was still beautiful. Two of the four walls were nothing but windows and doors. I was sure they afforded us a beautiful view during the daylight.

It was a mainly open-concept, so I could easily view most of the rooms. To my left was a kitchenette with a breakfast bar attached to it, with seating enough for four people. The living room was wide open with plenty of seating to enjoy the various views as well.

“There’s a bedroom and bathroom upstairs,” Lochlann informed me as he pointed to a spiral staircase to my right.

I hadn’t even noticed it. It was tucked away in the corner. I looked up and realized we had to be standing under the second level because the rest of the ceilings were vaulted.

“Our room’s this way,” he continued as he led me to the right of the kitchen.

I gasped when we entered the bedroom. It was stunning. A massive fireplace dominated one of the walls and a king-size bed the other. The other wall had windows up to the ceiling, and French doors that opened up to the back of the house. But what truly drew my attention was the tub built into the floor in front of the windows and off to the left of the fireplace.

The tub could easily fit six fully grown men. Candles surrounded it. It was also filled to the brim with bubbles, and red rose petals floated on the top. With the roaring fire and lit candles, the whole ambiance surrounding me screamed romance.

I turned and smiled at Lochlann. “How?” I inquired, slightly speechless at the thought he had put behind pampering me.

“The property manager was leaving as we were pulling up,” he grinned, not even pretending to misunderstand my question, “and I asked her to have it ready by the time we got here. Go ahead and get in. I hope the temperature is to your liking.”

I was eager to get in. I was sure the warm water would feel heavenly on my sore muscles. I walked over to my bag and decided I would quickly brush my teeth before I hopped in. I grabbed my toothbrush and toothpaste before heading to the closed doors. The first door had a small walk-in closet with a dresser in it. The second door opened up to the bathroom.

It was a decent size, with a large stone walk-in shower. I was slightly surprised to notice that one of the shower walls was entirely made of glass. I couldn’t imagine feeling comfortable getting naked in front of a plate of glass. Who knew if someone could walk by and see me?

I put toothpaste on my brush and walked over to the shower. I laughed around my toothbrush when I looked out at the view. The moon was full, and the stars filled the sky in its awestruck brilliance. I could see the reflection of the moon on a large body of water down at the bottom of the cliff we sat on.

“I knocked, but you didn’t answer,” Lochlann spoke, lightly knocking on the door. “Did you want a glass of wine?”

He smiled when he saw what drew my attention. “Are you up for a little bit of exhibitionism? If it makes you uncomfortable, the shower upstairs is completely enclosed, but no one can see us even if they walked by. We’re on private property, and anyone that gets this close to the house would be trespassing. However, the property manager informed me that the glass was custom made so that the owners could easily look out, but no one could see in.”

I walked back over to the sink and spat my toothpaste out. I rinsed my mouth and looked at Lochlann mischievously. “I don’t know, maybe the thrill of the thinking someone could walk by and see us getting it on would be a huge turn-on.”

He visibly swallowed but then laughed and leaned against the door frame. He braced his shoulder against the jamb and crossed

one foot in front of the other. He was still immaculately put together even after a long day of sitting, driving, and taking care of kids.

“It sounds like Golden’s been trying to sway you towards one of his fetishes,” his startling blue eyes were nearly unsettling as he contemplated me, “…if he hasn’t already.”

I didn’t question how he knew Golden’s sexual proclivities; I imagined there were little to no secrets between my guys.

“He hasn’t,” I admitted. “Although,” I added wickedly, “I can’t say that it doesn’t intrigue me on some level.”

He swallowed thickly again before taking a few steps towards me. He tilted my chin up so his lips could capture mine. His kiss was more insistent and demanding than ever, and I reveled in the hunger it awakened in me. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and delved my fingers in the short locks at the nape of his neck.

His groan was primal when I ran my nails against his scalp. He pulled my hips to him, and I felt his desire against my stomach. I moaned in return as I pressed against his cock, trying to angle myself so I could feel the friction of his erection where I really wanted it. For a few brief moments, he grasped my hips and allowed me to rub against him. He shuddered, and I could tell he was just as aroused as I was.

He pulled away, and his eyes looked more intense than I had ever seen them. In the fathomless depths of his bright blue eyes, I could see the hunger and desire there. I was unable to control the whimper that rose to my lips. I wanted him with a deep ache in my core.

“Your bath is getting cold,” he reluctantly reminded me.

I couldn’t hide my pout as I went back out to the room. Now that we were alone, I didn’t know why Lochlann was holding back. Didn’t he still want me? I walked over to the bath and unzipped my track jacket.

“Wine?” he inquired in the doorway leading to the living area.

I contemplated it for a second. “Yes, please.”

His lips tilted up slightly before he left the room. I took off the rest of my clothing and tossed my dirty clothes on the armchair near the fireplace. I’d pick them up later.

I shook myself out of my over-analytical thinking. We had time to discuss what our expectations were. I wasn't going to rush it. I was determined to enjoy the time we had away from everything and everyone else. We definitely needed this time together, which was what I should be thankful for, not adding more expectations on the whole situation.

I groaned in pleasure when I stepped down into the tub. It was still deliciously warm, almost bordering on too warm. I pulled my hair tie off my wrist and pulled my hair up into a messy bun, then situated myself into the corner of the tub and onto the built-in seat, sighing in contentment once more.

I immediately felt some of the tension leave my body as the warmth seeped into my joints. I hadn't realized how much I needed this until I was actually in the tub. I leaned my head back and couldn't help but smile at Lochlann's thoughtfulness.

"Knock, knock," Lochlann said from the doorway.

"Mmm, come in." I grinned his way.

He smiled at me in return before crossing the room and handing me my glass of wine. "How does it feel?" he inquired.

"Amazing," I answered on a breath. "Thank you."

There was a beat of silence as he looked over my hidden body, seeming to want to will the bubbles away. The bubbles and petals were so thick that nothing was showing below my shoulders. I was torn between wanting to laugh and feeling like I was adrift in the sea. This was unchartered territory for us.

We'd fooled around once, back when I had returned, but it seemed to have slightly disturbed him because, afterward, he had erected a wall between us. We had slept in bed together, but he hadn't attempted to become intimate with me since then, either. He had made a life-altering decision for us to be together finally, but did he want to wait longer for us to consummate our relationship?

He seemed almost undecided about what to do next, and I didn't know how to communicate with him that I wanted it all. I wanted us to be completely free, away from the public's eyes.

He straightened and smiled at me. "I think I'll try to find a movie for us out in the living room. If you're up for it, you can join me

when you are finished, if you're not too tired. Did you need anything?"

I swallowed all my shyness and looked behind him at the large television mounted on the wall across from the bed. "I want you to come in with me," I said boldly. "Maybe you can find us a movie and bring in that dessert you promised me?"

His teeth sunk into his bottom lip. "Are you sure?"

I knew he wasn't just asking about my current request. He wanted to see if I was ready for what was to come if we both got naked together.

"Positive," I said without hesitation.

He took a deep breath before he smiled "Do you have any preferences?"

"How do you feel about Harry Potter?" I laughed.

I barely watched *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* before falling asleep on the bus earlier, and it had been some time since I had a Harry Potter marathon. The last time I had one was right before I left to teach camp. Lucas, Madison, and I had hunkered down into her movie room with a crazy amount of food and drinks in tow. It wasn't long before Madison decided to turn it into a drinking game, where we had to take a sip of our alcoholic beverage every time Harry's name was said. Needless to say, it hadn't taken Lucas and Madison long to get drunk.

When they hadn't been looking, I had changed my drink out with water. Someone had to make sure no crazy decisions were made, which happened a lot with them. Lucas and Madison both came up with really, really bad ideas when they were drunk. It only took one awful night for me to realize someone had to remain responsible when alcohol was involved.

He grinned. "The books are better, but the movies are entertaining."

I had seen Lochlann relax with a book from time to time. It came as no surprise that he'd read the series.

I laughed. "I agree. Harry Potter it is."

He went to find the movie and then came back with a tray of assorted cheesecakes, a bottle of wine, and an empty glass for himself. He set them down beside me before standing to undress.

I hungrily watched him as he unbuttoned his steel-blue button-down shirt, revealing his perfectly chiseled body. His Adonis belt was begging me to run my tongue across it. As he unbuttoned his fitted gray slacks, I noticed the dark patch of his happy trail. I bit my bottom lip, feeling the warmth pool between my thighs. It was like I was having my own private little strip show.

He smirked as he continued to remove the rest of the clothing. I barely contained my ogling, my eyes widening when his cock sprung forth. It bounced off his taut abs in all its erect glory, and for a split second, I was leery of welcoming him between my legs. Were none of these men average or slightly above average?

Kyler had done a number on me last night, and I swear I could still feel the aftermath of our rendezvous from the previous night. Maybe I should have thought last night through. Then I internally shook my head. I couldn't tell Lochlann we couldn't mess around because his best friend had unleashed his beast on me last night. I would have to hope and pray Lochlann would take it easy on me since it was our first time together.

"You okay?" Lochlann asked softly.

"You're huge!" I blurted out without thinking.

He chuckled and shook his head before sliding into the bath beside me. "We don't have to do anything tonight, love, but… thanks? I guess."

He poured us each a glass of wine and turned on the movie. We sat in comfortable silence for several moments, sipping our drinks. I couldn't help but slip surreptitious glances his way, and the need to explore him increased with each ticking second. I knew he was acting the gentleman, so I finally decided to take matters into my own hands.

I felt the warmth infuse my cheeks before I slid over to him. He automatically grasped my hips and settled me to straddle his lap. All my misgivings about his size and my soreness were whisked away. I really wanted this man. I wanted to seal our relationship in the most intimate way possible.

"What if I want to do something with you tonight?" I asked, my voice husky.

I leaned forward and kissed my way up his neck before taking his earlobe into my mouth and gently tugging it between my teeth. He groaned and moved me closer to his arousal. I gasped when his warm, thick, hard length grazed my clit.

“Love,” he gasped between a groan and moan. “I want to take my time getting to know your body, but if you continue doing that, I can’t make any promises about my restraint. Why don’t we… uh… eat some dessert first?”

I saw the mischief dancing in his eyes and knew he wasn’t going to make this easy on me. I then realized he wanted me to control the situation, which meant he had no doubt that I really wanted this. I swallowed back a growl of frustration and glared at him.

He shook his head and chuckled before he caressed my thighs, hips, and waist with one hand, and with the other, he produced a fork-full of some kind of chocolate cheesecake. I reflexively opened my mouth as he slid the bite past my lips. I felt a crumb at the corner of his mouth, but before I could swipe my tongue to wipe it away, Lochlann leaned forward and sucked my bottom lip.

We fed each other a few more bites. When I started feeling my restlessness grow, I intentionally rubbed myself against him and pressed my chest against his. He licked his bottom lip and groaned at me. He put down his fork, his hands going back on my hips, stilling my movements.

“I feel like I’ve been waiting forever to make my fantasies into a reality, but you’ve had a long day,” he half-heartedly stated.

“I took a nap,” I reminded him impishly before adding, “You’ve had fantasies about me?”

“How could I not fantasize about you?” He leaned back to get another bite of food.

I leaned over, too, and grabbed the other fork. I chose a piece of cheesecake that had strawberries and whip cream on it. When I picked up a bite, Lochlann had his utensil poised in front of my mouth. I leaned forward, intentionally rubbing myself against him as I held my fork up against his lips.

“You minx,” he breathed out before he took a mouthful.

I watched in fascination as his strong jawline moved with each chew. I waited until I saw him swallow before leaning in and swiping my tongue against his lip. I took his full bottom lip between my teeth and nipped at him. He emitted a sound similar to a growl and grasped the back of my head with his free hand, angling my face to get the best access to my mouth. His kiss was ravenous as he tangled his tongue with my own.

I had to force myself to pull back from his mouth. “What did we do in these fantasies?” I was aching to feel him inside me, but on the other hand, I was enjoying this little interlude we were having. Who knew cheesecake and talk of fantasies could be so titillating?

“What *didn’t* we do?” His eyes were incredibly dark with desire.

I picked up a cheesecake piece with caramel and chocolate this time and held it out to him.

“I imagined you in the shower, on my bed, in the front seat of my car, under my desk at school,” he admitted huskily. He reached for some raspberry cheesecake, feeding me once more.

In the past, I couldn’t imagine words could get me so worked up. A touch, a caress, a kiss were typical methods of seduction for me. However, Lochlann’s words had me growing wetter with desire.

We both leaned forward simultaneously to taste each other's cheesecakes. His chocolate and caramel taste mixed with my raspberry. I didn’t know if the complimenting flavors made the combination all the sweeter or because our tongues made it so.

I was seconds away from guiding him toward my entrance and taking him inside my body, but I felt the need to heighten our moment more so. I slid back once more, but this time I grasped his hard length in my hand. I gave him a firm tug and squeeze.

“What would I have been doing under your desk, Mr. Isaacs?” I teased before intentionally sweeping my tongue over my lips.

Calling him Mr. Isaacs again was involuntary. I hadn’t put any thought into it, but I had to admit it sounded deliciously forbidden in this scenario. From the way his eyes narrowed, and that look of hunger on his face, he enjoyed the sound of it as well. Maybe it should have been creepy and gross under normal circumstances, but our situation had never been typical.

I had been drawn to him the moment he had suggested the coffee cakes to me on that long-ago day. He never used his position as a counselor to take advantage of me. Maybe if I were a regular eighteen-year-old girl that lived a reasonably normal life, it would have been different. However, I truly believed fate had thrown us together. I needed him in my life, and he was far from some creep taking advantage of me.

“Did you drop a pencil? Was I picking it up for you?” I purred as I nibbled his neck.

The way his hand gripped my waist, I knew he enjoyed my ministrations. I loved discovering what made these men tick. I enjoyed finding out what made them metaphorically or literally weak at the knee.

“No,” he groaned out.

“Then what was I doing under your desk?” I teased, taking his earlobe in my mouth once more.

“You were on your knees, taking my hard cock into that saucy mouth of yours.” He ground that very cock against my clit, and I yelped in surprise.

I felt my resolve crumbling, but I was still determined to let this side of me come out and play. I dropped my fork onto the serving plate and backed up.

“Get on the edge of the tub, Mr. Isaacs,” I commanded with breathy need.

His eyes widened for a moment, and somehow I intrinsically knew he wasn’t accustomed to taking orders in the bedroom.

He grasped my chin in his hands and gave me an intense look before he raised a brow at me. “I’m normally the one calling the shots, but for you, I’ll let you set the pace. For now,” he seemed to add as an afterthought.

I grinned as if I were the cat that ate the canary as I watched him stand. The shadows of the flames coming from the fireplace flickered across his god-like body, and the throb in my core was nearly physically painful. He was beautiful, and watching the water and bubbles trailing down his body was highly erotic.

He was barely on the edge of the tub before I was grasping his rock-hard thighs. I leaned forward and watched in fascination as a

bead of pre-cum emerged from the tip of his cock. I licked it and smiled at the sound that emitted from his throat. I embraced the feeling of power I felt. I loved knowing I could make this sexy, brilliant, self-sacrificing and thoughtful man unravel with a simple gesture.

He hissed out in pleasure as I continued to lick him up and down. I could see his fist clench several times before his hands weaved through my hair. I chuckled, knowing he was losing patience. This only made me more comfortable and confident in my ministrations for a man that seemed to be infinitely unflappable.

I opened my mouth and took him in. I immediately tried to take him to the back of my throat, which was a difficult feat. I relaxed my jaw and tried to swallow to open my throat more. I felt the urge to gag but became more determined not to as I heard his praises and sounds of pleasure.

I readjusted myself on the bath seat to take him at a better angle. I felt rather triumphant when I felt his balls touch my chin.

“Just like that, love. Damn girl,” he cursed as I took my tongue and ran it along his shaft. “This is even better than my fantasies,” he moaned out.

I grinned around him and hummed around his length. I slid my tongue and lips up and down him several times before the naughty part of me took over once more.

“Was this what I was doing to you under the desk, Mr. Isaacs?” I inquired coyishly.

Something seemed to snap in him as he hauled me up without preamble, slipping his arms under my thighs and carrying me bridal-style to the bed.

“You’re a wicked little girl, aren’t you, Ms. Delaney?” he growled out before he placed me on the bed.

“Sometimes.” I grinned as I licked my lips. “I wasn’t done yet, Mr. Isaacs. I was eager to find out how you tasted as you came down my throat.”

I didn’t know who this woman was that had taken over my mouth and thoughts, but it/ she felt right. I realized Lochlann was bringing out another side of me. She was similar to Notyep, but not. It was

like I was reacquainting myself to the alter ego that had been strangely silent for weeks.

A heavy feeling entered my heart for a second when I recognized that *she* had been missing and I hadn't even noticed it. Lochlann inadvertently was giving me back a piece of myself.

"I won't be coming down your throat. Yet," he nearly growled at me before he captured my lips.

His mouth was nearly bruising as he invaded all my senses with his touch and taste. He still tasted sweet from our dessert, and I moaned in pleasure. His lips left mine and began to trail down my jaw. I could feel the heavy rise and fall of his chest against my own. He seemed to be trying to discover what made me gasp and moan as his lips, tongue, and teeth found the erogenous zones along the side of my neck.

"Lochlann," I breathed out in a tormented whisper as his tongue moved across my collar bone and down my breasts.

My back bowed off the bed as he took a nipple into his mouth. He didn't seem to mind my small breasts as he caressed one. With his other hand, he placed it firmly onto my stomach.

"You're not so teasingly mouthy when the shoe is on the other foot," he said with a wicked smirk before switching to my other breast.

I reveled in seeing the other part of him emerge. I didn't put much thought into Lochlann in the bedroom. I felt like he was the most unattainable and forbidden. I had tried not to get my hopes up too high so that I wouldn't set myself up for disappointment. A small part of me even questioned whether we would become intimate before my time or his time ended at school. Even before this getaway trip, I wondered if his moral compass would have kept him bound to his high standards.

"I haven't started teasing you yet," I growled back playfully as I took a handful of his hair and pulled on it.

The things he was doing to my nipple with his tongue and teeth were driving me crazy. I never thought I could come without clitoral stimulation and by a mere touch, but I knew I was precariously close to doing so.

"Lochlann," I whined out.

All thoughts of teasing him vanished as I pleaded for him to fill the aching void in me. I bucked my hips, eager to show him what I wanted him to do. He chuckled and put pressure on the hand against my stomach. He stood and pulled me to the edge of the bed.

He looked achingly beautiful with his mussed-up hair and the savage beast under his carefully controlled facade that was close to cracking. I could see the primal part of him in his eyes. He took off his glasses, and just like Clark Kent, he seemed to have magically transformed into Superman. He tossed them in the direction of one of his nightstands without a care, and that only made me ache for him more. I loved seeing him break from the constraints that generally bound him.

He lowered to his knees between my spread thighs. A delicious shiver raced up my spine at the look he was giving me. He looked like he could devour me whole.

What a delightful way to go.

“I can see how bad you want this, Ms. Delaney,” he almost crooned as his long, lean fingers barely brushed my nether lips. “So wet. *Do* you want this?” He raised a brow at me.

“Yes,” I gasped.

His touch was so light as his hand circled everywhere but where I wanted him to be—no, where I *needed* him to be.

“Do naughty girls deserve rewards?” He smirked as his mouth hovered over my core.

I could feel his warm breath on me, and I attempted to lift my hips towards his mouth, but he firmly kept his hand on my stomach once more, making me unable to lift my hips. I growled out.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he tsked. “Do naughty girls deserve rewards?”

“No, sir,” I whimpered when I realized he was expecting a response to his question. So, I slipped into the role we were playing. “I promise to be a good girl. Please, Mr. Isaacs.”

“Since you asked so nicely.” I could hear the smile in his voice before he lowered his mouth onto me.

I cried out in pleasure and relief. Lochlann licked me, collecting my juices on his tongue before he finally reached my clit. My hips shot up off the bed as I realized how precariously close I

was to coming. He seemed to know this as he slipped one finger inside me.

“So much better,” he muttered almost to himself.

I vaguely realized he was probably talking about his fantasies he’d had about me. He made me feel even more powerful and confident.

“Lochlann, please,” I cried out as he slipped another finger in.

I forgot about our little game as he took me to the edge and then retreated.

“Please, what. What do you want, Peyton?” he murmured against my clit.

The vibrations of his words made my stomach muscles clench. I cried out once more as another one of his fingers slipped into me. He curled his fingers in and found my G-spot with ease.

“I want you inside me,” I nearly begged.

“As you wish,” he muttered after licking me and sucking on my clit.

He stood and placed my legs over his shoulders. He grasped my hips and rubbed his cock across my clit.

“Do I need a condom?” he inquired as he finally placed the head of his cock at my entrance.

“No,” I nearly screamed.

He growled loudly in pleasure, seemingly satisfied by my answer. It took him less than a second to bury himself fully inside me. For a split second, my body screamed in protest. Firstly, because it had taken a pounding last night, and secondly, he was enormous at this angle.

I felt myself clench around him tightly, and he cursed but stilled.

He let out a groan between concern and pain. “Is it too much?”

I forced myself to relax around him as he lightly began to circle my clit with his thumb.

“No, no.” I finally breathed out as my body pushed down the residual pain. “Give me more.” I made sure to make eye contact with him so he could read the truth in my eyes.

He let out a pleased noise before he grasped my hips once more, lifting me, making it hard to grind against him as he pumped my body onto his cock.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “So much better than my fantasies. You were made for me,” he gasped as he continued to thrust into me.

He seemed to have located my G-spot once more at this angle, and I grasped his thighs, digging my nails into them.

“Lochlann,” I cried out as I felt the pressure in my stomach rise. “Harder,” I begged him, lost in the feel of him and his intense blue eyes.

“I don’t want to break you,” he groaned out as he leaned forward more.

I laughed in frustration and surprise. “You won’t break me. Please.”

The last of his control snapped, and I would have been sliding across the bed if it wasn’t for his hold on my hips. I felt the edge of my release. It came upon me like a freight train as I was hurtled off, and when I screamed out his name, the tremors were intense. My orgasm seemed to go on forever as he released one of my legs.

He joined me on the bed and let me catch my breath, still inside me. “Can I find out how flexible you really are?” he asked, with a pleased smile curling his lips.

I nodded numbly, barely registering his words as my body shook with the after-effects of my mind-blowing orgasm. He got up on one knee, looping one of my ankles over his wrist.

I gasped in surprise and pleasure as he took that leg nearly to my head. It was like I was almost contorted into a split, and I moaned at how he seemed to fill every inch of me in this position. The expression on his face was a cross between intense pleasure and near pain as I clenched around him.

My curiosity rose in me, and I wanted to experiment with an idea that teased the edges of my consciousness. With one hand, I straightened out my right leg and, with the other hand, I grabbed my left ankle, stretching out my leg into a full split. If I turned my head slightly, I’d see my left foot.

I knew I was really flexible, but I’d never played with my flexibility in the bedroom yet. Lochlann’s answering groan was

enough for me to know I was blowing his mind with this position. He was cursing and praising me in the same breath as he began to grind his hips into me. I loved the control I had regained in our interlude. I could see his body quiver as he neared his release.

He was driving into me with long deep thrusts. I reached up with my free hand and pulled him down to my lips.

“Come for me again,” he commanded.

Our kisses were frantic and a little messy, but I loved it! My eyes widened when he angled himself, so his pelvic bone was brushing my over-sensitive clit.

“Lochlann,” I cried out when I realized another orgasm was ripping me in two.

I felt my body clench around him as I was hurled into darkness. I could hear him gutturally groan out my name. I could feel him coming, and his words made me feel even more cherished and pleased. It was satisfying knowing he could lose himself in my body as easily as I lost myself in his.

Several moments later, my senses returned as he slowly lowered my leg back down, collapsing so that his head was cradled against my stomach. His body was sprawled between my legs. I could see the rapid rise and fall of his back, mirroring my chest. A slight sheen of sweat covered both of our bodies. Our breaths came out slightly labored as if we weren’t two physically fit adults.

I couldn’t help the giggle that rose from my mouth as euphoria set in. I felt delightfully weightless, the orgasms had been mind-numbingly amazing, and it was humorous to see how wrecked we both were.

He lifted his head from my stomach, and a serene smile spread across his lips. He was even more beautiful when completely unraveled, I realized as he crawled up my body. He was poised above me and gave me a sweet but thorough kiss.

“If there were any doubts left in my head, they’re all gone now,” he murmured against my lips.

I slipped my fingers through his hair and slightly lifted his head. I kissed the corner of his lips. Confusion seeped in as his words were fully computed to my sex-addled brain. “Doubts about what?” I asked in a whisper.

Of course, my over-analytical brain wanted to dissect his words, and because my life was full of disappointments, I could be pessimistic at times.

He threaded his fingers through my hair as well. His nose touched mine. Without his glasses, his eyes seemed even more intense as they stared back into mine.

“The fog of grief had seemed to fill my lungs with every breath I took, so I felt like I could never breathe normally ever again. Then this graceful, beautiful girl with haunting eyes and a world of understanding waltzed into my life as I was getting a cup of coffee. I think I knew the moment our eyes met that my life would never be the same. A new door had opened in my life. I tried to deny my feelings for you for a long time. When I finally accepted them, I wanted you−no, I needed you. I realized I could possibly fall for you someday. Then as I watched Clay cling to you in the back of that ambulance, I knew I loved you. When you were taken, I felt like my breath was stolen from me once again.

“Since having you returned to us, I realized I didn’t just love you; I might even be *in* love with you. I desired you in so many ways, and I imagined how it would feel when I could finally make you mine. Now, having you in my arms, hearing you cry out my name, feeling you shatter around me, I have no doubt. I am irrevocably, undeniably in love with you.”

I was both touched and fulfilled by his words. I tried to gather my thoughts so I could tell him how much he had come to mean to me, too. I wanted to tell him how I had realized in the darkest days of my abduction that the thoughts of him and the other guys were the only things that made me fight to survive and return to them.

“I don’t want you to tell me you love me if you’re not ready,” he stated without an ounce of insecurity or doubt. “I’m not telling you I’m in love with you for a reciprocation.”

I laughed and cradled his face. “I love you, Lochlann Isaacs. I have no doubts. You were the first man in my life that ever drew me in. I may have dated boys in the past, but I never felt connected with them or even wanted to be. I wasn’t even aware I could feel so connected to anyone before you. I felt so disappointed when I found out you were a counselor. I can’t tell you how happy I was when you

decided to care for me knowing you wouldn't or couldn't be the only man in my life.

"I may have saved you when you were grieving over the loss of your parents, but you saved me, too. If I didn't have you or the others in my life, I don't think I would have ever fought to escape Coach, Principal Boyd, and Tormentor. I never experienced unconditional love until I met you all. You sacrificed your life and future plans to come back to guide Paxton and Golden and get through a dark time in their lives as you were navigating the uncharted waters of your own. You fought tooth and nail to keep Maisie and Clay. You are one of the most self-sacrificing, honorable men I have ever met, and I'm a lucky woman to have a man like you in my life. You have no clue how much your love makes me even luckier."

He shook his head, a bemused smile on his face as he kissed me. We got lost in each other before he pulled away. His breathing was ragged again.

"I think I'm the lucky one," he muttered against my lips before kissing me once more.

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Uncomfortable Conversations

“How about this one?” I asked as I stepped out of the dressing room.

Lochlann and I had talked about the homecoming dance, and he insisted that we look for a dress today. I believed he secretly wanted to help me choose one and see it on me before the other guys could. It wasn’t like he could take me to Homecoming on Friday. He was forced on the sidelines once more.

Lochlann looked up from his phone, and I had to smile at his visceral reaction. His eyes widened, darkened with lust, and I could see his Adam's apple bob up and down. He stood up and made a circular motion with his fingers.

I hid my smile as I slowly turned for him. I had to admit I would have never picked the dress out for myself, but once I zipped up the side zipper and looked in the mirror, I knew this was the one. I was thrilled I suggested that Lochlann choose a few dresses for me to try on. After all, it was his idea to check out the little boutique after brunch.

The dress he chose was the third one I had tried on. It was made of a stretchy champagne mesh and had gold sequins that traveled throughout the bateau neckline. The sleeves were three-quarter length, and the dress had a bodycon bodice. The skirt fell to mid-thigh with a scalloped hem. The back was nearly non-existent, with a deep-V ending at the top of my butt.

He took a few steps forward and pulled me into an embrace. He immediately captured my lips, and I could feel the urgent hunger in it. I moaned deep in my throat as I felt my desire immediately rise. I looped my hands over his shoulders and dug my hands in his hair, grinding against him.

I reveled in his passionate kiss, knowing we only had a little while longer to embrace our freedom. Soon, we would have to head back

home to make it in time for dinner. Our brief interlude was ending far too soon. Not for the first time, I wished we had the whole weekend and not just a day to ourselves.

Lochlann had proven to be an insatiable and thorough lover. After a brief respite from our first time, he had gone down on me until I was unraveling on his tongue. Then he introduced me to another sexual position. He seemed eager to gauge my flexibility range in the bedroom, and I had been his eager pupil.

I thought he had drained me dry, and I didn't believe my poor lady bits could take anymore, but then I woke up. Waking up to a naked Lochlann had been too much for my overactive libido. I couldn't resist rousing him up with a blow job. Of course, he proved just as unselfish in the bedroom as he repositioned me so he could eat me out at the same time.

If my stomach hadn't growled so loudly while we were basking in the afterglow, I would have been content to stay in the bedroom until we left. Lochlann insisted that we needed to find sustenance, but neither one of us could conjure up the energy or desire to cook. So after we shared a shower and a few more intimate moments, we reluctantly decided to pack up and head into town.

"That dress was made for you," the sales lady said with a touch of reproof.

It was clear that she was displeased that we were going at it like two horny teenagers in the back of her store. Typically, I might have experienced some embarrassment or mortification. However, I couldn't even pretend to feel any of that. I was basking in the fact that Lochlann and I could communicate our love for each other without people we may know spreading our business and making rumors.

Lochlann might've had one foot out the door at my school, but he still needed to exercise caution. There was always a chance someone, somewhere, might dole out punishment for him.

"I agree." Lochlann smirked, and I saw the unconcerned look in his eyes as well.

He trailed his fingers down my spine before stepping back. His light touch elicited a shiver of arousal up my body. His pleased smile made me mock-roll my eyes at him. He should be careful how he

tread with me. Otherwise, he would soon find out how vindictive I could be, but in a totally loving way.

“I know just the perfect shoes to go with them,” the sales lady said, seeming determined to break through our interlude.

“Can you get a pair in size eight and eight-and-a-half?” I inquired as I continued to gaze up at Lochlann.

I had never seen him so carefree and relaxed. I luxuriated in the feelings it evoked in me. I loved seeing this other side of him. I could imagine this was how he was before he became a father overnight. Golden and Paxton really didn’t need much more guidance, but I knew Lochlann had stepped in for them and became their rock. He also never hesitated or debated whether or not to continue caring for the two young siblings he’d rarely interacted with.

From his stories, I knew he hadn’t been quite a partier in college. However, he hadn’t been a hermit either. In fact, a few of his fraternity buddies from college were expected to visit sometime in the near future. I was actually looking forward to meeting them and learning more about Lochlann.

I might not be able to act as his girlfriend then, and he probably wouldn’t be as affectionate towards me when they’d be around, but I wasn’t hurt or bothered by the thought. I recognized the fact that society frowned upon our relationship. I understood that my relationship with him, his brothers, and his friends wasn’t acceptable by usual standards.

But I didn’t think anyone had a right to judge us. I expected a lot of scorn and ridicule for our decisions, too. However, I wasn’t going to be a social crusader and shove my situation down their throats either. At the end of the day, if we were happy, then that’s all that mattered. I didn’t owe anyone any explanations, and I wasn’t going to justify my actions to them either.

“Have you ever had sex in public?” I asked him coyly as I ran my nails over his pecs and down to his abs.

He was extremely sensitive and could be turned on quite easily when his happy trail was caressed. I had been pleased to discover that tidbit of information and planned to exploit it in the future.

“Don’t you start something you can’t finish, Ms. Delaney,” he growled against my lips before giving me a bruising kiss.

I loved teasing him and seeing how far I could push him until his inner beast came out to play.

“Who said I was teasing?” I smirked as I tugged him towards the dressing room.

I really didn’t plan on having sex with him while an over-attentive sales lady hovered nearby. However, I couldn’t deny the sense of intrigue in me at the mere thought of hooking up with him in a public setting. I quickly realized I was discovering more and more sides to my sexuality. My interest was piqued, and I wanted to explore it all. I had no doubt I wouldn’t care for everything, but I was determined to uncover as much as possible with my guys.

“If the sales lady weren’t on her way back, I would more than happily show you how much that dress affected me,” he growled out as he rubbed his arousal against my stomach. “However, this store is too small, and I’ve discovered, much to my liking, that you aren’t a quiet comer.” He pushed a strand of hair off my face and cupped my cheek.

Well, technically, the hair he pushed off my face wasn’t my own. It was the long blond wig I had worn on my birthday. Maybe the lightness and carefree attitude I was experiencing today was partially due to the fact that nobody seemed to recognize me. And I mean nobody. Not one person whispered about my identity or trained their phones on me so they could snap a picture.

Even Sal and Des had hung back and discreetly followed us today. They had chosen a table on the other side of the restaurant we had brunch at. They still had eyes on us but kept their distance. Then, when we started exploring the stores, they didn’t enter them with us. They sipped on their coffees and hung out on the benches strategically placed along the sidewalks.

It was so much easier to feel like the old me without the daily reminders of how drastically my life had changed since my abduction. It was as if a heavy yoke had been removed from my shoulders, and I was finally free. I felt a thousand pounds lighter.

“I can learn to be quiet.” I smirked at him. “And you didn’t answer my question. Have you ever had sex in public?” I reached down to palm his erection and gently squeezed.

He hissed out as his eyes narrowed on me. “You’re a naughty girl and deserve a spanking. Yes, I’ve had sex in public in the past.”

A brief feeling of jealousy hit me. I hated imagining another woman knowing him as I did. Then I quickly dashed those thoughts away. He was mine now. How could I be jealous of his past when he shared my present with five other men?

“Ooo,” I cooed. “I do like a good spanking. Where was the craziest place you hooked up with someone?”

With my jealousy pushed aside, I was genuinely curious.

He seemed to examine me for a moment before he smirked. “You let Ky spank you, didn’t you?” He grasped my hips and pulled me closer.

I didn’t even have to evaluate his response. Lochlann and Kyler were best friends, since high school. I was sure the subject of their kinks had come up a time or two.

His nose skimmed my neck before he took one of my earlobes between his teeth. I whimpered as I felt my immediate reaction.

“And did you enjoy it?” he asked.

“You keep avoiding my questions,” I whimpered as my eyes closed to enjoy his ministrations further.

“In the back of a pickup truck at one of our bonfires in college.”

I had thought he only had the one experience and was shocked when he continued, nibbling on my neck all the while.

“In the pool at our frat house. In college, under the bleachers at one of our home games at half-time,” he answered before nibbling down my neck. “Your turn.”

The clenching in my stomach was back. I could feel my arousal begin to coat my panties.

“Yes, I enjoyed the spanking,” I admitted. “I was rather surprised to discover I enjoyed toeing the line between pain and pleasure. Although I can’t imagine wanting to be tied up anytime soon,” I added wryly. “Are you a bit of an exhibitionist?”

I wanted to be open with Lochlann about my curiosities. I also wanted to make him aware that I still had some hang-ups. I hated that my abduction had instilled fears in me that I would never have had if it hadn’t been for my kidnappers’ treatment of me. I didn’t think

I could ever be tied down without remembering how I'd woken up in that very way in the cabin in the woods, or without recalling the smell of burning flesh and the excruciating pain as Tormentor snubbed his cigarettes out on my arm as I was restrained, helpless, and unable to do anything about it.

Lochlann stepped back, gently grasped my chin, and tilted my head up. He placed a sweet kiss on my lips.

"I wouldn't say I'm an exhibitionist, but I don't shy away from public… affection. I've never been into tying girls down. It's just not my cup of tea." He gently stroked my hair off my face. "I also hope you realize you should never feel uncomfortable or afraid in the bedroom with us. Don't ever be reticent to speak up and let us know what you like and what you don't."

I appreciated his concern and support. However, I wasn't ready to take our conversation into the dark. I enjoyed the lighter side of him and loved how it evoked the same feelings from me. I had enough darkness shrouding me lately, and I needed to cling to the light more often.

"'The dolphin' was slightly uncomfortable at first," I told him tongue in cheek. I was clearly steering the conversation away from my painful memories. "But once we got the hang of it… I enjoyed it."

Last night, he had taken me in 'the dolphin position.' I'd never heard of it. He had never tried it. Apparently, he had come across it in an article in a magazine about different Kama Sutra positions. It piqued his interest, so he guided me into the position last night. Needless to say, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

At my words, he blinked. I didn't think I had ever surprised him into silence before. He seemed to be dissecting me for a few moments, then started laughing− eye crinkles and all. I knew he had been tempting to "shrink" me, but luckily he understood my need to veer from the tough conversation.

"This is why I love you so damn much," he murmured against my lips. "You are so brave and fearless."

"I think you're gonna love me even more when I get a hold of a Kama Sutra book. I smirked against his lips. "I fully intend on circling the positions that capture my attention the most. You're more than

welcome to highlight any positions that you want to try. Also, feel free to X-out ones that you feel are too difficult or impossible."

"No position will be difficult," he scoffed as he pulled me in closer to his body. His hands were caressing my bare back. "Especially with your flexibility and my stamina," he added cockily.

A throat loudly cleared behind Lochlann, and I looked up to see the sales lady nearly as red as her shirt. In her hands were two shoeboxes, and there was no doubt she had heard our conversation. Lochlann seemed almost as embarrassed as he took a step away from me, but I was amused.

I took the shoeboxes from the lady. "Thank you very much." I smiled as I took a seat on one of the plush armchairs. "I'm sorry if you heard any of that," I added with a mischievous grin. "Are you married? We're newly married and still in the honeymoon phase."

I heard Lochlann make a sound between a cough and gasp.

The sales lady smiled and raised her hand, displaying a beautiful ring set. "I've been married for twelve years. Between college, finding our careers, buying a house, raising three kids− two, five, and ten− and facing life together, I wished I would have bottled up a fraction of that excitement. Nowadays," she said a touch bitterly, "if a sports game is on, he barely acknowledges our existence. Sadly, he follows all sports. I really can't remember the last time we were intimate." She sighed, then smiled sweetly. "Enjoy the honeymoon phase for as long as it lasts."

I bit my bottom lip and looked at Lochlann. I felt like I was out of depth with this awkward turn of events. Was voicing condolences appropriate? Because I sure as hell didn't have any words of advice for her.

His eyes were full of mirth as he looked back at me. "My wife thinks if she purchases us a Kama Sutra book, it will keep our love life spicy. I'm inclined to agree with her."

The saleslady snorted. "I've looked through that book. I doubt my husband has the stamina to attempt even a quarter of those positions, and after giving birth to three big babies, I've kissed my flexibility away."

It was my turn to make an inarticulate sound as I stood up in the pair of five-inch heels. I took a few quick steps to check them for

comfort. I wasn't crazy about heels, but this dress required them.

"I think these are perfect," I blurted out. "What do you think, my love?"

Lochlann smirked. "I think you make everything beautiful, love," he responded.

I heard the saleslady sigh once more. "Like I said, hold onto it. I'll be at the register to check y'all out."

"We'll be right there," I reassured her. "Oh my goodness," I mouthed to Lochlann as she briskly walked away.

I had just wanted to see if I could tease Lochlann; I hadn't expected the woman to spill her life story to us. I kind of felt sorry for her. I hoped twelve years from now I wasn't as… bitter or unsatisfied with my love life. Although, if I was lucky enough to be with the guys for a long time, I didn't think I was in danger of having a lackluster sex life anytime soon.

He covered his laughter with his hand and shook his head at me. "Get dressed, wifey, so that we can get out of here." He was clearly amused by my embarrassment now.

I rolled my eyes and walked towards the dressing room loudly proclaiming, "No, my love, you can wait fifteen minutes until we're home. Are you sure you're not a sex addict?"

I was pleased to have riled him up once more.

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"How is this even possible?" I exclaimed as I flashed Lochlann the book.

I was looking at an illustration of a man in the 'backward bend' position while the woman straddled him from above.

He laughed and shook his head. "Yeah, no, I don't think any of us are capable of doing that. Well, maybe Zane."

I giggled and shook my head as I flipped to the next page. "I'll pass. It doesn't even look comfortable."

Before we'd left town, I had dragged Lochlann into a bookstore. I picked up a few books for Renee and Maisie. Renee loved reading, and I so happened to know her favorite author had just released a new book. And Maisie was eager to get her hands on chapter books since her reading had greatly improved since the beginning of the

year. Of course, acquiring a Kama Sutra book had been my main objective; the other gifts a happy coincidence.

I made sure to get little gifts for everyone. Since Paxton's birthday was coming up, I took the opportunity to get his presents now as well.

"Let's try the 'triumph arch next.'" I held up the book.

Lochlann laughed and slid one of his hands on my thigh, squeezing it. "I'll try anything you want to try, love."

I laughed and closed the book as I realized we had turned onto our road. "I've highlighted the names of positions that looked interesting to me. I'll let you peruse it at your leisure," I winked at him, "and you can highlight some of your favs." I clipped a different color highlighter onto the paperback.

The first hour of our journey home, we had simply talked and enjoyed each other's company. I had only pulled out the book for the last half hour of our drive.

"Thank you for last night and today," I told him, linking my fingers through his and squeezing. "I had such a fun and amazing time. Can we do it again sometime?"

He picked up our linked hands and kissed the back of mine. "Of course. I think we need to slip away from the norm from time to time. You know, to keep our love alive." He winked at me.

I shook my head and laughed. "Yeah, twelve years from now, I wouldn't want to tell some unsuspecting strangers about our *lackluster sex life*, or should I say 'nonexistent?'"

He looked over at me, and I could see the hesitation in his eyes. "We'll be together in twelve years?"

"That's what I hope," I said quietly, avoiding his penetrating gaze. I knew I couldn't picture a future without him and the others, but I'd only had this conversation with a few of them. "Do you not still see us together?"

He kissed the back of my hand once more. "In my fantasies. In reality, I wonder how you'll feel about us once you're away from here. I always thought I would come back here, but once I went away to college and realized that there's a whole other world beyond this small town, my plans changed. I had no intention of returning… unless it was just to visit. I had jobs lined up in the big city. If my

parents hadn't passed away, I think I would be there now. I don't want us holding you back. Once you're away, I don't want you to realize you don't belong here anymore and feel obligated to return. You were meant to fly, and I don't want us to be the reason you don't."

I was both hurt and angered by his words. I didn't want to believe he was pushing me away. I also didn't appreciate the fact that he assumed they were the ones holding me back. It wasn't like I wasn't going to continue to pursue my dreams. I just planned to try to keep the guys while I was doing it. I knew with determination and dedication to each other, we could make it work.

"Do you regret coming back?" I finally asked after a long beat of silence.

"No," he said with zero hesitation. "But I had a reason to return."

"And I don't?" I scolded. "I know it's not going to be easy. I won't even pretend to believe that. However, I think anything worth keeping is worth fighting for. The love I have for you guys will never diminish or lessen over time. I feel that deep within my soul. I never felt such a keen sense of belonging until I met you guys. It has nothing to do with where we are but if we're together. Do you think we aren't worth fighting for? How can you tell me you love me but believe it has an expiration date? When I chose to give you my heart, I never had, nor will I, any intention of asking for it back. It doesn't work that way."

He was silent for a few moments as we pulled into the driveway. "I totally believe we're worth fighting for. No, I don't believe our love has an expiration date, and I know that I'll never love another as I love you. I thought I'd found love before. Hell, I even asked a woman to marry me weeks before our graduation. She bailed after my parents' and siblings' funeral. Her unwillingness to try to make us work and insisting on uprooting the whole family made me question what I believed was love. Now that I found you, I have no doubt I was never *in* love with her to begin with. I loved the *idea* of her. I loved the way we looked on paper, but it was all so analytical and clinical."

I was shocked by his admission. No one told me he had been engaged with someone. "Why am I just hearing about this now?" I

asked with a frown.

He shrugged, looking slightly sheepish as he put the car in park. “That’s how unimportant she became. It hurt at first, but then you came into my life. I realized she hadn’t crossed my mind in days. It was like an epiphany. She’s now a part of my past, just another lesson.”

I sat contemplating his words for a few moments. I was still torn between being irritated and upset. I was just finding this out and realized I should probably let it go. Once again, she was in his past, and she didn’t affect our present.

I turned in my seat and leaned in to kiss him. “I will never feel like you or the others are holding me back. No one has asked me to change my plans to fit theirs. As I said, once I get done with school, or if my dance career doesn’t pan out, I’ll go wherever most of you are. Plus, Grandpa and David are here.”

At his skeptical look, I laughed and added, “I know, I know. I have no high hopes of discovering a relationship with David, but he seems sincere enough right now. The more I get to know him, the more I realize we have some eerie similarities. But, yeah, I have complete faith we can make this work. However, if down the road you find out that it doesn’t work for you, or if you even have the smallest feeling that someone else completes you, then I won’t hold you back, either. It would hurt, but I won’t hold onto someone that doesn’t want to be held onto.”

He threaded his fingers through my hair and pulled me in for another kiss. “I’ll wait. If it takes four years or ten, I’m in it for the long haul if you are. I’m going back to school soon. I’ll have breaks. The kids and I can come to visit you wherever you land, and hopefully, you’ll find opportunities to come and visit us as well.”

“You guys were there for me when my mom left. You were there for me when I was taken and have helped me navigate my way back physically, emotionally, and mentally since my return. You have shown infinite patience and understanding. I’ll do whatever it takes to make this work,” I said with conviction.

He grinned at me and kissed me again. “You make me so happy.”

“Ditto, lover boy,” I teased.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Let’s get inside and figure out what’s for dinner.”

“Let’s,” I agreed.

I had enjoyed my time away with Lochlann, but a small part of me missed my other guys and the kids. I couldn’t wait to see what they thought about the gifts I got them.

I went to the trunk, and Lochlann and I began to gather our bags.

“Need any help?” Sal asked as he approached.

I jumped, and he gave me a rueful look. “Sorry about that.”

I took a deep calming breath. One day I wouldn’t be so jumpy. “It’s okay. Yes, please, if you don’t mind?”

“Not at all.” Sal shook his head, grabbing a few shopping bags.

“We’re going to start dinner soon. You and Des are more than welcome to join us if you like,” I offered.

“I’m going to talk to the security guys and then probably head over to the apartment,” Des said as he joined us, pointing towards the apartment above the garage.

“I’ll drop these off and come with you Des. But, man, I could definitely eat.” Sal rubbed his stomach.

I laughed as I grabbed the last bag I could comfortably carry. “Shit,” I muttered, my laughter fading from my lips as I finally noticed the little red BMW.

“What’s wrong?” Lochlann frowned.

“I forgot that Madison was coming over today,” I growled in frustration.

Lochlann sighed. “We can tell her it's not a good time.”

“No,” I shook my head, “Golden needs to get a good grade on this project, and the teacher won’t let them switch partners. It’s due soon, and the sooner it’s finished, the better.” I let out a breath. “I have a feeling I can’t always avoid Madison, especially if Zane and Crew end up at her college. I have the rest of the year and possibly the next four years of her in my life. I’m just going to have to suck it up and figure out how to deal with it.”

“We’re here for you.” Lochlann leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

I took another deep, calming breath, threw my shoulders back, and headed inside. I had a fantastic weekend. I was going to cling to

those feelings to help me make it through the night.

24

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Cut so Deep

“I missed you.” Golden kissed my shoulder.

I looked over my shoulder and smiled at him. He’d been really affectionate since I came home with Lochlann. I didn’t know if he was being super handsy and loving because we’d barely seen each other the last few days, or he wanted to prove to Madison that he was genuinely, deeply invested in us. Either way, I wasn’t complaining.

We were currently sitting at the dining room table while they worked on their project. Zane and Paxton seemed to have been working as chaperones in my absence. Madison wasn’t supposed to be here for another hour or so but had conveniently shown up early. Paxton gleefully explained that he had been sitting at the counter editing photos to keep an eye on Madison.

“I missed you too,” I informed him, kissing the tip of his nose.

“Madison, would you like a cheeseburger?” Lochlann asked as he prepped the patties.

“Umm…” She looked at me as if she wasn’t quite sure what my reaction would be.

“It is around dinner time.” I said with a shrug.

It wasn’t like I hated the girl. I just felt deeply betrayed and hurt by her actions while I was absent. I didn’t know if she was capable of genuine remorse, but as I said, if she would go to the same college Zane and Crew could possibly go to then, I had to accept her presence in our lives. She would be a cheerleader there, and the cheerleaders and football players were thrown continuously together.

“Um, sure,” Madison piped up. “My mom pays for these pre-prepped meals that I just pop in the microwave. Unfortunately, she thinks I gained weight, so she has me on a no-carb diet. I already worked out today. I can afford to eat a burger.” She pulled a face, and for a microsecond, I wanted to commiserate with her. Her

mother had an obsession with her daughter maintaining a particular image. When Madison hit puberty, her hormones made her gain a little weight. By society's standards, however, she was healthy and appeared perfectly normal.

Madison hadn't inherited her mother's natural petiteness and stature, which was unacceptable to Vivian, and she "feared" that Madison had taken after her father's side of the family, who weren't *huge*, but they weren't small either.

Vivian had put her on a stringent diet for months until she believed Madison was at the proper weight once more. Every time Vivian perceived that Madison was gaining weight, she was put on a diet. Madison used to lament about it when we were younger, but once we hit high school, she pretended as if it was perfectly normal to have her mother dictating what she ate. She insisted that as a flyer, she needed to remain tiny.

In my opinion, Madison looked better with the extra ten to fifteen pounds. I had envied her curves once upon a time. Now her clavicles were prominent at this current weight, her cheekbones too sharp, and you could physically see her spine and ribs. I thought it was highly unhealthy, but our relationship wasn't the same. I couldn't tell her that she wasn't overweight by anyone's standards, that she looked fine the way she was.

"Does she always watch what you eat?" Lochlann frowned.

I knew it was the counselor in him that was concerned, and I didn't begrudge him for it. Just because I couldn't reassure Madison didn't mean Lochlann couldn't. It was his job to guide "today's youth." Honestly, it *was* a concern, and an adult needed to address it.

"She understands how important becoming a Dallas Cheerleader is to me." Madison nonchalantly shrugged. "She's only looking out for my best interest. She understands how I can be scatterbrained at times. She just nudges me back on track."

I barely refrained from rolling my eyes. "I'm making a latte. Want anything?" I asked Golden and Madison.

She was a guest, so I couldn't be completely rude.

I also knew my vacillating emotions were causing me whiplash.

"Do you have sugar-free syrup?" Madison immediately asked.

“I think there are some sugar-free hazelnut and vanilla up in the pantry,” Zane piped up. “Can I have mocha?”

“Of course.” I smiled. “Loch? Golden?”

“I’ll take what you’re having, thanks.” Golden kissed my temple.

“Can I have sugar-free vanilla? Do you have skim milk?” Madison inquired.

“We do,” Lochlann confirmed as he looked in the refrigerator.

Madison nodded. “Awesome. I’ll take that, please.”

I could be annoyed by how specific she had gotten, but I chose not to. In the past, I would have laughed, shook my head, and teased her for it. We just weren’t there anymore. I would make her latte as requested because she was a guest.

“And you?” I asked Lochlann as I traced my hand over his back after ensuring Madison and Golden were still working on their storyboard.

Madison knew I was in a relationship with them all. Also, she wasn’t dense. She saw us return with a lot of shopping bags and our overnight bags. I’m sure she realized that we had spent somewhere overnight together. However, we still wanted to keep our relationship under wraps around her. She had new friends, and I couldn’t guarantee that she wouldn't spill my secrets, especially if she was drinking.

Lochlann looked over my shoulder as well before he leaned back into me and kissed the top of my head. “I’ll take a regular hazelnut, please. Thank you.”

“Drinks are coming up,” I called as I pulled the milk from the refrigerator.

“Pey, Pey, Pey,” Clay cried out happily from the hallway.

I turned around and noticed Paxton carrying Clay in. Apparently, he wasn’t put down for his nap at his usual time, so he was still sleeping when Lochlann and I got home. It was going to be fun putting him down tonight. Not.

He squirmed away from Paxton and ran to me on chubby legs.

“Clay,” I crooned after grabbing the large stuffed dinosaur I picked up for him off the counter.

I scooped him up and immediately placed a kiss on the top of his head. “Look what Loch and Pey got you.” I smiled as he snuggled it close.

“Mine? Dino?” he asked excitedly, bouncing up and down in excitement.

I laughed and cuddled him close. “Yes, your dino.”

We had gotten Maisie a colossal Lego set. She was generally a child with a lot of energy but give her a Lego set and she would sit for an inordinate amount of time. She followed the directions really well and barely requested help on any of it.

We had set her up in the front playroom and cleared one of the activity centers. It was high enough that Clay couldn’t mess with it, and she could take her time putting it together. It would probably keep her busy for most of the night and maybe a few days after school.

I adjusted Clay on my hip, knowing he wouldn’t want to be put back down, and began warming up the milk. It was hard to do everything with one hand, but I didn’t mind. I loved these kids and knew these moments should be cherished.

“Mine.” Clay shoved his dinosaur in my face.

“Yes, yours.” I laughed, grabbing the espresso out of the cabinet.

“What’s this?” Paxton came back into the room, brandishing my dress bag.

“Don’t open it!” I quickly exclaimed.

Just because Lochlann already saw me in it didn’t mean I wanted the guys to see me in it just yet.

“It’s my Homecoming dress. If I get asked,” I teased as I turned back around to pull down some cups for our lattes.

“What do you mean ‘if you get asked,’” Golden loudly protested. “I already told you I wanted to take you.”

“Telling and asking are two totally different things,” I responded with tongue in cheek.

“Fine.” Golden teasingly sighed loudly. “Peyton, will you go to the homecoming dance with me?”

“That’s it?” Kyler rumbled from the archway.

I grinned happily as I turned to look at Kyler. He had been at one of his investment properties today. He was hoping to have it on the market by Wednesday, so he was doing all the last-minute things before the realtor came to take pictures on Tuesday. He looked like he had put some work in today, because sawdust clung to his shorn hair, and his hands still had paint on them. His jeans had drywall dust powdering them, and his white t-shirt wasn't as white anymore.

He directly crossed the room with a knowing smirk. He knew how much I loved seeing him after a long hard day of work. Something about a man who worked with his hands could be a major turn-on.

He cupped my face before leaning in to kiss me. His lips told me immediately how much he missed me even though it had technically only been a day. His tongue danced with mine with a primal desire. I sighed into his kiss, feeling my libido rise with every second that passed.

"No! My Pey!" Clay loudly exclaimed, pushing Kyler away, reminding us of his presence in my arms. A look of total determination and ire screwed up his little face. I couldn't help but laugh. My little buddy was clearly attached to me.

"*My* Pey," Kyler teased him, ruffling his hair, "you little punk."

"No nice!" Clay growled.

I laughed once more. "You tell Ky Ky, little man!"

"You never answered me," Golden loudly bemoaned.

"You didn't ask right." Kyler smirked before walking over to the refrigerator and retrieving a beer.

Golden frowned. "How is that not right?"

"Last year, you sent Bailey a dozen roses when you asked her," Paxton smugly commented as he sat back down next to Zane at the island.

For a second, I felt shafted, but then I shrugged off the feeling. There was a reason Golden wasn't with Bailey any longer despite her attempts to get back with him. Plus, I really was just teasing him. I never wanted the over-the-top display.

I felt like social media made more of the proposals than they should have been. If it was an actual proposal− like marriage− okay then. However, this was just a dance. Someone down the line had

decided to make proms such a big deal, and then Homecoming became a thing. I just believed it made us more narcissistic. It was like we didn't get enough attention and wanted more. There had to be a line drawn somewhere.

"It was for prom, and she insisted I do something special," Golden protested. "She cried until she got her way. Is an over-the-top request required for homecomings now, too?" he asked in exasperation. He looked at me expectantly, but I pretended not to see his gaze. I wanted to let him squirm a little.

I poured the hot milk into Zane's and Lochlann's prepared cups, hiding my smile.

"Besides," Paxton smirked as he tried to open my garment bag, "I already planned to pop the question on Tuesday at school."

"Knock it off," I yelled at him. "It's a surprise for whoever I decide to take."

"I want to see it now, though," Paxton pouted.

"It looks great on her," Lochlann wickedly teased.

"*He* got to see it?" Paxton and Golden complained simultaneously.

"I had to go shopping with someone." I laughed.

"I would have gone with you," Madison piped up.

I internally sighed, reminded once more of her presence. "I heard you were going with some of the girls on the team on Saturday."

Not that I would have gone with you, I silently added. Madison and her new friends had loudly talked all about it as we were getting ready for the game the other night.

"I would have gone with you as well." Madison genuinely looked hurt.

"We're not there," I told her bluntly. "Yet," I added because of her pained expression. I really had a bleeding heart at times. "Plus," I continued, "I don't have that many days left to go shopping, and I didn't know what they'd have to offer around here."

"We could have found a shop in the city tomorrow," Paxton reminded me.

"No, we couldn't," I gave him a pointed look, "Zane and I are going. *No* one else."

“That’s not fair,” Paxton pouted again. “I could miss a day of school, too.”

“It’s a closed audition,” Zane lied with a straight face.

I gave him an appreciative smile, sliding him his latte after handing Lochlann his. It probably was a closed audition, but knowing Paxton, he would have attempted to get in anyway.

“Did you really want to wander around by yourself?” Zane continued. “Knowing you, you would get lost after the first hour, and we couldn’t come to rescue you.”

“Hey,” Paxton complained. “I could have used my GPS on my phone and found something to do.”

“You’re not going, Pax,” Lochlann said firmly. “There will be other times you can accompany them,” he said with conviction.

Paxton pouted once more as Kyler chuckled.

“I’m going to hop in the shower, kitten. Make sure you tell them exactly how you want them to propose to you for Homecoming.” He kissed my cheek.

I laughed at his instigating wickedness as I stirred Golden’s and Madison's drinks.

“What’s going on in the city?” Madison curiously asked as I dropped off her drink.

Again I didn’t want to be rude, but I didn’t want her believing we were all good if she continued to attempt to engage me in conversation.

“They got an audition for a music video,” Paxton blurted out, oblivious to my reservations.

“What?” Madison said in genuine excitement. “No way! For who? How? That’s amazing!”

I feigned a smile and shrugged. “We don’t even know,” I explained, heading back over to the espresso machine, Clay still contentedly clinging onto me. “A man that works for this record label approached me a couple of months ago. He invited me to audition for an unnamed artist. I thought I lost my chance, but then he approached me again this weekend. He saw me and Zane dance and invited us both.”

“How exciting!” Madison laughed.

“It is,” I admitted with a smile as I looked over at Zane.

He gave me a gentle smile back, and I was filled with happiness once more. I was so excited to share this journey with him. Even if it didn't pan out, it was still an adventure I would forever remember.

"It's not a guarantee that we'll land the spots, but it would give me an idea of what to expect in the future," I said with a shrug.

"You'll get the spots," Paxton said with conviction.

"I think it means a lot for him to have hunted you down again," Lochlann reassured me as he passed, squeezing my shoulder.

I smiled at him and felt that warmth in my chest once more. We needed last night and this morning. I was so glad to have had that time with him.

"For sure, especially if he doesn't like who they had originally cast," Golden added. "I wish we could see you, but I'm sure you're going to knock it out of the park."

"You'll see us when the video is released," Zane said with more boldness than he generally exhibited. He was a humble man by nature, an amazing quarterback and fantastic dancer, but he never let it get to his head. He typically took praise with a modest attitude.

I laughed and shook my head. "We'll see. Fingers crossed, though." I poured my espresso over the syrup in my cup. "Pax, would you like a latte?"

"Yes, please." Paxton nodded. "I'll take a caramel mocha. Now, about this proposal, is a singing gram too much?"

I laughed and shook my head.

"I called her first," Golden protested. "I'll have to think of something, but I'll ask right."

I continued laughing as I turned around, my cup poised against my lips. "Really, I don't want an elaborate proposal. Plus, I want to go with all of you. You don't all need to ask."

"Really?" Paxton inquired hopefully.

I nodded. "Well, aren't you all my boyfriends?" I teased them.

"What color's your dress?" Zane inquired immediately. "I would like to match you in some way."

"I'll get the corsage," Golden called out next.

Paxton pulled out his phone. "I'll rent us a limo!"

I leaned against the counter, cuddled Clay closer, and basked in contentment.

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My contentment was dashed away less than an hour later. It wasn't until we were sitting down on the back porch, the patio heaters on high, that I realized I hadn't heard back from Crew.

"Has anyone heard from Crew?" I inquired as I added tomatoes and pickles to my cheeseburger.

Paxton told me Crew was supposed to be working on the investment property today with Kyler. It hadn't even occurred to me that he hadn't returned with him until that moment.

"I thought he was with you?" Zane looked over at Kyler.

Kyler frowned. "He left around noon. He didn't come back here?"

"He didn't come back last night either," Golden said, frowning too.

"Where did he go? He's not answering my text." A feeling like lead sank to the pit of my stomach.

Crew had been so distant lately. I assumed the recent occurrences had been weighing heavily on him. I knew he tended to withdraw into himself when he was stressing out, but he never went this long without at least saying something to me.

Madison cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably in her seat across from me. "I saw him at Jere's party last night. He was with that Jana chick and her friends."

"He what?" Kyler stood up with a thunderous expression.

"I'm sure he just saw her, and that was it," Paxton said soothingly. "They have history, and you know she wants him back."

That didn't resonate with me right, though. Crew had been acting weird for several days now. What if he changed his mind about me?

"They looked awfully cozy." Madison bit her bottom lip.

I stood up, feeling sick to my stomach. Had Butch's reappearance caused this change in him? I knew he had tried to separate himself from his father's legacy after his father left town, but was that a conscious decision? Did he separate himself because he was determined to forge his own path? Or because his father was no longer there to guide him?

Jana had taken to her father's legacy with ease. Crew admitted to aiding her in her time of need. He resolutely told me he didn't want that life, but things change. I didn't want to believe he would go back to that life, but why was he ghosting me?

I had to find out. I needed to remind Crew that he had a bright future in front of him.

Me: Call me, please.

I left the porch and walked into the house with the guise of getting a glass of water, but in truth, I needed to take a few calming breaths. Something felt off. Something told me something wasn't right. I needed to process my feelings without everyone eyeing me.

I also needed to know for sure if Madison was really trying to help me, or was she causing further dissension between my guys and me? She hadn't flirted the entire night with any of my guys, and flirting was second-nature to her. She reminded me of a better Madison than I had known and had actually seemed to be considerate of my emotions, finally seeming to realize how much my guys meant to me. Unfortunately, she had shattered my trust so badly I didn't know how, or if, she could ever gain it back.

I knew Heather attended most of the parties around here, and I trusted her to a large degree. She had been nothing but supportive and friendly to me since I returned, without pitying me or treating me differently. Freddy was just as amazing. I decided to shoot them both a text as well.

Me: Did you guys go to Jere's party Saturday night?

Crew didn't like going to parties. He was more of a homebody. The only parties he attended were ones where he watched over me. So, it didn't make any sense why he would be there. However, Madison said she'd seen him. Whether or not he was cozied up to Jana was another issue altogether.

"Let's eat, Peyton, and then I'll go hunt him down," Kyler insisted quietly from the door.

"Do you think he's running for Butch?" I asked him, speaking my fears aloud.

Kyler heavily sighed before he walked over to me. He pulled me in close. "I want to say no," he admitted after several moments of silence. "However, I can't say it with any conviction."

I felt like someone had reached into my chest and now had my heart tightly gripped in their fist.

"If he is, there has to be a reason," Kyler resolutely explained. "He told Jana he couldn't be with her if she was running. He wanted

to separate himself from Butch and all his dirty dealings. So there has to be a reason why he was seen with Jana. She cut him deeper than anyone ever has, and Crew is notorious for setting bridges on fire. Once you wrong him, he's never had any issues cutting himself off from whoever wronged him."

"If that was the case, why has he been ghosting me?" My voice cracked with my emotions. "He left early yesterday. I haven't talked to him since Friday night, and even then he was withdrawn. I texted him a couple of times since then, and I'm ashamed just now to realize I still haven't heard from him. How was he at work today?"

"Quiet," Kyler growled out his frustration holding me closer. "He helped me install some fixtures, wall plates, and staged a few areas for me. Then he bounced. I knew something was eating at him, but I normally let him come to me when he's finally ready to talk− if he's ready to talk. Sometimes, he works it out himself."

"Something's wrong," I whispered, reveling in his strength.

"We'll figure it out," Kyler asserted. "I'll get to the bottom of this. After dinner, I'll hop in the truck and hunt him down. For now, though, you need to take care of yourself. You're still recovering and you need to keep your strength up. Especially since you have a major audition tomorrow."

I reluctantly nodded. I knew he was being logical. Tomorrow was a big day, and if I let my emotions get the better of me, I would be throwing away another huge opportunity. My future could possibly rely on this.

I had to think with my head. I couldn't assume anything. I needed to just hope there was a perfect reason for Crew avoiding us right now.

I let Kyler guide me back onto the porch and took my seat between him and Golden.

"Did you make your brownies for dessert?" Mr. Jenkins asked from his seat beside Lochlann and Paxton.

I attempted to smile at him. "As soon as I found out you were coming over. I have more in some Tupperware for you to take home with you, too."

Mr. Jenkins and Zane were in love with Mam's brownies. I was so excited to have found her recipes. I had made them at the first

opportunity I could. Luckily, they claimed they tasted the same. Now Mr. Jenkins, Henry − Grandpa's assistant− and Zane were always requesting them. I tried to have them on hand at all times just for them.

"Yum." Mr. Jenkins rubbed his hands excitedly.

I knew he was attempting to keep my mind off of Crew. I appreciated it, but now I felt like I was missing a vital part of me.

My phone vibrated as Kyler handed me a bowl of salad with my favorite dressing on top. I wanted to answer it but didn't want to be rude and look at it. I also feared what it might say.

I forced a bite of the cheeseburger in my mouth. It tasted like sawdust, and my stomach wanted to reject it immediately. I resolutely chewed it and swallowed.

Kyler was right. I needed to eat. I was finally gaining back my weight. I couldn't afford to lose that again. I needed to keep my energy up if I was to present myself in the best light tomorrow.

"How early are you leaving in the morning?" Golden inquired.

Again, I knew it was just another attempt to get my mind off the situation at hand. I looked at everyone else's expressions. I saw their concern as well. They had all been friends for a long time. Yes, they had periods from time to time that they hadn't hung out as much, but they had spent everyday together since I entered their lives.

They admitted to growing closer, and even though their personalities could be so vastly different at times, it just worked. Their friendship went beyond the norm. Trials and tribulations had forged a bond more profound than even family.

"According to Maps, it should take us a little under four hours, and our appointment is at ten. I think we should hit the road by five-thirty just in case," Zane answered.

I robotically nodded as I chewed on a fry. "I'll get my bag ready tonight and have it ready by the front door."

"You'll be back tomorrow night, right?" Paxton inquired as he doused his fries with salt and malt vinegar.

"That's the plan," Zane answered. "Mr. Brady was going to set up a meeting with the choreographer and the band's manager. I can't imagine it lasting more than the early evening at the most."

“If you get too tired to drive back, you should find a room,” Lochlann insisted. “I’ll give you my card.”

“I have a card,” I protested, my mind still a million miles away.

Grandpa had given me a card, but I barely used it. The guys were continually covering me unless I picked up lunch for us all. Even then, they had been known to place an order online and pay for it as they did it.

“Any reputable place probably won’t rent you a room,” Lochlann replied with a slight grimace. “If you decide to stop, let me know the location. I’ll book you a room, and you’ll need it to check-in.”

“Or we can go pick them up,” Paxton volunteered gleefully.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine.” Zane grinned with a roll of his eyes.

I decided I’d had enough to eat. I stood up and took my plate into the house.

With shaking hands, I opened up my messages and saw Freddie’s right away.

Freddie: You know I was, lol

Me: Did you see Crew and Jana together?

Freddie: Define together. :-/ I wanted to text you but then decided it would be better F2F.

I felt that deep chasm in my chest growing. I closed my eyes and leaned against the counter. I felt sick to my stomach. Part of me wanted to pretend like this wasn’t happening.

Me: Were they holding hands? Kissing?

Freddie: I never saw him hug or kiss her, but she was draped all over him all night. He didn’t look too happy about it, though…

I dropped my phone on the counter as if it had personally offended me.

Why? What had I done? Why did he return to her? Why was he hanging out with her? Did he have an ulterior motive? Did he decide he couldn’t be one of six vying for my attention?

“I’m sorry, Peyton,” Madison said quietly from behind me.

“What are you sorry about?” I nearly snarled as I buried my face in my hands. “You had no such qualms moving in on Golden while I was taken. You were my best friend. Jana never even pretended to like me.”

I wasn't pinning this all on Jana, however. I knew it took two to tango. I knew if Crew had chosen to leave me for her, then it had been his choice. I always worried this might eventually happen with the guys, but a small part of me doubted Crew would be the first to cut me. And, yes, he'd cut me deep. So deep.

I heard her sharp intake of breath. "I wish I could take it back, Pey. Yes, I saw how much they liked you, but I didn't know the feelings ran that deep. You never seemed bothered by guys chasing me after they showed interest in you in the past. I didn't think you would mind if I set my sight on one of them."

"Of course you didn't," I scoffed. "You know what's funny? Since you were always so generous with handing down clothes to me or paying for lunches I couldn't afford, I had always felt that I somehow *owed you*. Don't you see how fucked up that was? Even if I wasn't emotionally invested in any of those other guys, shouldn't there have been some kind of girl code?

I shook my head and continued. "You were my best friend, so you should have known me better than most. You should have realized this wasn't the same. I casually dated in the past. I never felt the desire to be around a guy for any lengthy amount of time. You knew nearly every waking moment was spent with them. You saw how close I was with all of them, save Lochlann because of his position in the school. You could have waited until− I don't know− maybe a year after I disappeared to move in on one of them. You didn't even know if I was dead! Could you have really been okay dating a man I cared so much about if that had been the case?"

"I know I fucked up!" Madison cried. "I know I can be self-centered and selfish. I knew the moment I started getting attracted to Golden I should have separated myself from him. But as each day passed with no news about you, or another false lead, I felt like he was the only one who understood how lost I felt. I hated it when you told me you were moving. I felt like a piece of me was missing. I chose to move here for you, and I lost sight of that. What can I do to fix this?"

I looked at her with a blank expression. I knew she felt remorse. I think she realized she had crossed a line she should never have

crossed. However, I didn't know if there was anything to rectify the situation. It was like closing the gate after the horse already ran out.

"I don't know if anything can fix this," I finally admitted. "You made me lose my trust. How can I trust you in the future? I'm already struggling with so many things, and I need people in my corner I can rely on. How can I ever depend on you again?"

She brushed her tears away with her fingertips. "I've learned from my mistake," she insisted.

I heard a noise and noticed Golden and Zane hovering in the doorway. A thought suddenly struck me.

"Have you?" I inquired. "If Golden was to leave me tomorrow and ask you out, would you date him?"

Golden went to speak, but Zane placed a hand over his mouth.

Madison paused for a second too long.

"Just as I thought." I sighed wearily. "I've got an early morning and still need to get my bag ready. I'll see you around, Madison."

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Audition

The building we were auditioning in blended in with the rest of the buildings in the vicinity. There wasn't anything that screamed how much importance the brick-and-mortar establishment might hold for us today. In fact, I thought maybe we had received the wrong address or had gotten lost, until we walked up to the building and noticed the small 8 x 10 placard affixed to the door.

The building appeared to house several businesses, but we could locate ours with relative ease once we approached it.

"We got this," Zane said with conviction as he squeezed my hand.

I attempted to smile at him and was beyond thankful to have him by my side. If I had been by myself, I didn't think I could do it. I wasn't in the right frame of my mind to audition. There was too much noise in my head, and I was afraid it would affect my performance. There was too much pain in my chest to ignore.

By the time I came back upstairs last night, Kyler and Lochlann had already left to locate Crew. They hadn't returned by the time Zane and I went to bed, either. I had tossed and turned most of the night, hoping to hear anything. I hadn't.

When Zane and I came up to eat before we left, Kyler looked like he hadn't even slept yet. He informed me that they hadn't found Crew, but they would. It did little to comfort me, especially since Crew never called me as I requested.

Of course, my wild imagination had gone through a thousand different scenarios: Crew was ghosting us all. He'd decided to get back with Jana. Or worse, he was running with Butch and was in trouble. Did Butch still beat on him?

"From your lips to God's ears," I rasped, pulling my thoughts back to the present. Hours of silence had affected my vocal cords.

Zane hadn't even tried to placate me or give me false promises during the drive. He'd leant me the exact support I needed. He held my hand, handed me my coffee, and put on some of my favorite tunes. It's exactly what I had needed this morning.

"You have the talent, beautiful," Zane reassured me. "Leave everything right here. Lose yourself to the music. Shut out all the nonsense. You can pick it back up when you've landed the spot."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath in. I attempted to do just that. On the dance floor, I wasn't the woman that got abducted and suffered from anxiety and panic attacks because of it. Out there, I didn't have a mother that had abandoned me. When I danced, no one cared that one of my boyfriends had left me. Somewhere out there, someone was suffering far more significantly than I was, with fewer opportunities to change their lives than I had at this moment.

"You guys are going to knock it out of the park," Sal confidently said as he opened the door for us.

We entered the modest but well-designed lobby, and I immediately noticed the stylishly dressed woman sitting behind a desk. We made our way over. She gave us a shrewd look followed by a bright smile and held up her pointer finger as she addressed someone on the phone. After several seconds she finally disconnected her call.

"Thanks for waiting. How can I help you?" the receptionist inquired.

"We have a ten o'clock appointment with Mr. Brady," I piped up.

"Of course, I should have guessed," she gave us another perusal, but it wasn't rude.

We had dressed comfortably for our audition. I was wearing a black long-sleeve mock turtleneck midriff shirt, and under my yoga pants was a pair of red boy shorts. Zane purposely chose to wear an outfit to compliment mine. He wore a fitted sleeveless red t-shirt and black loose-fitting black pants.

"I'll call up to his assistant and see if they're ready for you," she continued as she hit some buttons on a switchboard in front of her.

She had a murmured conversation with someone on the other end before she looked up at us and smiled. "They're ready for you.

Go over to the elevators and take it to the sixteenth floor. Camille will meet you and direct you to the right location."

"Thank you," Zane spoke for us as he threaded his fingers through mine.

The closer we walked to the bank of elevators, the faster my heart beat. With each step, I convinced myself that I could successfully leave all my shit at the door— where it belonged. The butterflies that took flight in my stomach were much more violent than the typical ones I felt. In fact, I was convinced my butterflies had transformed into the large creepy Abbot's Sphinx moths, which were reported to be the size of a grown man's palm.

My own palms felt sweaty, and my knees quaked with nerves. Zane seemed to sense my rise in anxiety, because he pulled me in close the moment we stepped into the elevator. Sal gave him an understanding look and punched the button for the sixteenth floor. I leaned my head into Zane's chest as he gently rubbed my back, his lips planted on my forehead.

When the elevator dinged and opened, we took a few steps forward. There was no one to greet us. I looked to our left and right. No placards were guiding our direction now. I looked at Zane and Sal, and they gave me identical shrugs. Suddenly, I could hear raised voices.

"−and I'm saying, *once again*, it's a waste of time," a woman yelled in frustration. "They're fucking rock stars! They have women throwing themselves at them all the time. Just because Layden got a new piece of ass that they're trying to appease, we're jumping through hoops for them?"

Zane and I looked at each other in confusion. The name "Layden" didn't ring a bell with me, and it didn't seem to register with Zane, either. I tried racking my brain, and at the same time, my nerves increased. It was obvious not everyone wanted us here.

"Watch what you're saying. You're just as replaceable," a man growled out in response. "We didn't ask for your opinion. Do your job and teach them the dance. Just that easy. They're your clients. It's your job to make sure they get the services they paid for. If they want to make changes the day of, we do it. It's not the first, or last, time we'll experience this."

“I already did my job,” the woman complained. “I already got the perfect dancer. She understands now the error of her ways and promises to be on her best behavior from here on out.”

Nerves and curiosity took a front seat in my head as I wondered what their original lead could have done to warrant such strong feelings. I didn’t have to wait long to have my curiosity assuaged.

I recognized Mr. Brady's voice as he spoke up calmly. “She breached her contract the moment she broke into their hotel room and proceeded to get naked in their bed. She’s lucky she wasn’t fired immediately. So we’re finding her another spot. I’m telling you, Peyton is the girl we’re looking for. Her friend Zane is an added bonus. They’ll bring the chemistry the other two didn’t have.”

Zane gently squeezed my shoulder, and I wondered if we should announce our presence. Somehow I don’t think this argument was intended for our ears.

“You have been obsessing about this girl from the start,” the female protested once more. “Do you even know if she’s half the dancer she used to be? Are we sure she’s even mentally and emotionally stable? Tell me the truth; you’re just hoping for more press because of who she is. You know there are rumors that she made it all up, right? That she’s a pathological liar. Her story doesn’t match up with the other women found.”

My heart sank as her words took root in my head. I hoped I wasn’t being used for who I was. I prayed Mr. Brady had seen my potential from months ago and remembered that instead of banking on an opportunity to make more money.

Zane squeezed my hand and shook his head. I looked at him with tears burning the back of my eyes. I didn’t want to be used. If I was going to land this audition, I wanted it based on my talents, *not* on who I was.

“Brady wouldn’t hire you based on who you are,” a gentle lilting masculine voice piped up from behind me, as if reading my thoughts. “He believes in finding talent and giving his clients the best.”

I spun around abruptly and noticed a tall, handsome man. He had beautiful auburn hair shorn on the sides but was a mess of curls on the top. His emerald-green eyes seemed open and honest. His facial structure rivaled Lochlann’s but leaned towards the… pretty side. He

had a lean but muscular body with colorful, beautiful tattoos adorning his forearms and disappearing into his fitted olive-green tee.

“Grady Caillat?” Sal cleared his throat, barely masking his awe.

I had to admit I didn’t recognize him right off the bat, and his name didn’t ring any bells, but when he smiled, I was reminded of a YouTube video I had recently watched. Crew loved his alternative rock bands and had introduced me to their music. Uncaged, the band, had been on the scene for the last few years but seemed to have really found their stride this past year.

I was ashamed to admit that even though I had recognized a few of their number one hits from mainstream on the radio, I hadn’t known too much about them until recently. In fact, one of their songs had just been added to my playlist, only because of Crew’s interest in them.

Grady gave Sal a pleasant smile. “I am. You’re not one of the dancers, are you?” he joked as he examined Sal’s large frame.

“Nope, he’s my shadow,” I quipped, trying to recover from being caught eavesdropping. “That’s what you get when you are ‘mentally or emotionally unstable’ because you’re ‘a pathological liar,’” I added self-deprecatingly.

My first instinct was to cave under the new pressure thrust upon me, but it was quickly followed by anger. I didn’t come all the way here to become a mascot or an advertising gimmick. I knew my worth, even if I wasn’t exactly where I wanted to be in my dancing.

Another warm smile spread across Grady’s face. If I didn’t have six—could I still count Crew?—handsome men in my like, I could easily be attracted to him. He had an easy-going aura about him that set me at ease and didn’t carry the airs I assumed most famous people carried.

“I think of myself as being emotionally stable,” he said. “My mental stability is questionable at times, but let's be real; we all carry a little crazy. Is that why I have two shadows waiting for me in the lobby? I didn’t even realize I had been evaluated *to be* deemed unstable.” He chuckled.

I couldn’t help but smile at him. “Sal, my Shadow,” I joked. “He just showed up one day. However, I didn’t need an evaluation to

realize I'm mentally and emotionally… challenged. But I refuse to believe I'm a hundred percent unstable… yet."

He laughed once more, head thrown back and all. "You have to meet my girl. She'll love the way you approach criticism. It's refreshing."

"Well, thanks. This is my reaction today. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?" I said with a rueful smile.

He gave me a calculating look before he solemnly nodded. "I think that applies to us all, if we're honest with ourselves. Self-awareness can aid in all our recovery and growth. As with everything else, there are always setbacks no matter who we are and what we may have gone through."

I cocked my head to my side. His intense gaze reminded me of Lochlann's in so many ways. It was like he could strip away my layers and actually see me. I didn't know if it was comforting or intimidating.

"Peyton, Zane?" Mr. Brady came into the room with a wide smile. "You're here. Early. I like it!"

I could see the unease in his eyes, and I was sure he was wondering how much we had overheard. I tried to school my features to imitate some professionalism. I knew how this industry worked. One person could love you while the others would just chew you up and spit you out. I was determined not to give them a reason not to like me based on my personality alone or how I presented myself. If they wanted to hate me, let them decide to do so based on what I was selling: dancing.

"We didn't know how long it would take us," Zane explained. "We were lucky to avoid all the traffic coming in. It's good to see you again, Mr. Brady."

"I'm glad you found us okay," Mr. Brady seemed to relax by our expressions. "And please, call me Martin."

"Well, time's a wastin'," a woman snipped out. "Let's see what you've got."

The woman was pretty, in a quirky way. She was roughly around my height with a toned dancer's body on display, wearing a crop top and sweatpants. Her hair was in a peek-a-boo style. I could see a layer of bubble gum pink hair under her white strands on top. Her

make-up accentuated her alabaster skin and almost overly-large blue eyes. She had multiple piercings in her ears, one in her nose, and one through her lip.

I assumed immediately that she no longer danced professionally, or if she did, it wasn't by traditional means. The ballet world, especially, could be snobs when it came to body modifications and markings. That's why I knew I wasn't aiming for being the next great Prima ballerina. That world was too strict, and I knew it wasn't a box I wanted to be put in.

"Someone didn't have their caffeine this morning," Grady said dryly.

I hadn't even noticed Grady had taken a step back—a tiny alcove had been concealing him. He didn't look happy as he took a few steps towards us.

"Grady?" another man joined us in the lobby. "What are you doing here?"

Holy hotness. This guy was highly attractive, to say the least. Not to say I was attracted to him, but he was a fine specimen of a man. He had an exotic look to him that made me wonder what nationality, if not more than one, he was mixed with. His skin was almost a bronze color, his hair black, and his eyes a very light hazel that were at odds compared to the rest of his features.

"Jack," Grady nodded as he stuffed his hands in his worn jeans, "Just checking on the new talent. We wanted a larger say this time."

"It's not necessary, Grady," the woman simpered, suddenly full of sweetness and lacking all the vitriol she was spewing moments ago. "I'm sure we can see if these two are up to par without wasting your time."

"I say it isn't wasting my time, it's vital," Grady said. "Unlike in the past, we'll be on the set a lot more. I can't have what occurred Friday happen again." He had lost all his affable persona. He was now shrewd and almost harsh. "I also," he looked over at the man he called Jack, "have Naila on her way over."

"Why is Naila coming?" the woman asked, her voice rising in shrillness.

Grady shook his head. "I don't have to explain myself to you, Ray. Go ahead and take the rest of the day off. You're already

setting a toxic environment, and I don't need it. They don't need it, either." He pointed towards us. "Peyton and Zane, would you like a beverage before we begin? Snacks? How 'bout you, Sal?"

Ray opened and closed her mouth several times. "Are you firing me?"

"Maybe," Grady said with a careless shrug. "I'll have Jack tell you later. Right now, as you aptly pointed out, time's a wastin'."

"Raina, go," Jack said with warning.

Raina looked like she wanted to go-off, instead, but she seemed to catch herself at the last second before she turned on her heels and stormed towards the room they had been arguing in earlier. Moments later, she came back out carrying a bookbag. She glared at Zane and me as if we were responsible for her dismissal.

"Beverages?" Grady looked at us once more.

"I'm good." I held up my insulated water bottle. "Thank you."

I didn't know what had just happened, but I was sure it was a good thing. Raina had doubted our abilities before we'd even walked through the door. I knew it would have messed with my head the whole time had she stuck around. I already had a labyrinth of negativity up there without adding more to it.

"We brought our water, thank you. Sal?" Zane looked over at the bigger man.

"I wouldn't mind a coffee. Black. Uh…. Thanks." Sal still seemed in awe of Grady.

I was determined to stalk this band after we left here. If Grady's bandmates were anything like him, I had a feeling I would like them all. He seemed so down-to-earth, highly intelligent, and determined to ensure anyone that worked for or with them was in the best environment possible.

"Okay then," Grady pulled out his phone, "Martin? Jack? You guys want anything?"

"Thanks, Gray," Jack answered Grady, shortening his name, "but we have Trixie running out for us."

Just then, the elevators pinged behind us.

"Oh good, you're here." A younger woman came rushing out of the elevators. She made a beeline towards me and Zane. "I'm

Camille, Martin's assistant and the person you've been emailing. Did you get off on the wrong floor?"

I frowned and shook my head. "The receptionist directed us to this floor."

A thought then struck me. Did the receptionist set us up? Did she purposely send us to the wrong floor? If so, why?

Camille sighed heavily but then shook her head. "No worries, I guess. You're here now. Trixie ran to get us some snacks. Want anything?"

"We're good, thank you," I murmured.

"Okay, great." Martin clapped his hands. "Let's show these guys and girls what you got." he looked at Zane and me. "Did you bring your music? Did you need to stretch first?"

"We brought it, and yes, please, we'll need to stretch," Zane spoke.

"I'll take them in," Camille volunteered. "Follow me," she said when Martin nodded at her.

"We'll give you guys ten, fifteen minutes and then we'll come in," Martin stated as he began to speak quietly to Grady and Jack.

Camille led us into a large open room. The wood floors shone with the reflection of the abundant sunlight streaming into the floor-to-ceiling windows. The windows had an impressive architectural design that seemed reminiscent of warehouse windows, with a curved top. Two of the four walls were original brick and had an industrial but elegant feel to them as well.

"Music?" Camille gently prompted, holding out her hand.

I dug into the front pocket of my duffle bag and handed her the CD with our music on it. We decided to stick with the number we did on Saturday. After our success, it felt like it was the best decision to present ourselves with today.

"It's the first track," I informed her as I pulled up my warm-up playlist on my phone.

Zane pulled me into an embrace and kissed the tip of my nose wordlessly. I allowed myself to melt into his hold for a few brief seconds before I found a spot against the wall to put my duffel bag down. I opened it up and removed my yoga pants, socks, and shoes.

Zane found a spot next to me and removed his hoodie, shoes, and socks as well.

“My songs or yours?” Zane smirked at me, knowing the answer.

I laughed and shook my head. “As if I’ll let you choose our warm-up songs.”

Zane was talented in many ways, but his taste in music left something to be desired at times. He had a thing for old-school artists like Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennet, Bing Crosby. There was nothing wrong with their music. However, they didn’t get me in the zone like my music did.

Zane grinned and shrugged a shoulder. “Didn’t hurt to try.”

“Never again,” I teased him as I pushed play.

Walk Through Fire by The EverLove started playing through my phone, and I began to do jumping jacks to get my body warmed up. Zane took a spot near me and started his own set. We had done this so many times that it came effortlessly.

Once I felt like my muscles were warm enough, I began to do some deep stretches. It wasn’t until I was doing the splits that I realized that I felt the pull, but it was no longer excruciating.

“I think I’m getting my mojo back,” I murmured to Zane.

“Oh yeah?” Zane grinned as he stood from his straddle. “Take the wall.”

The guys always teased him for his flexibility, but I thought it was hot. I got up and moved to the wall. I braced my back against it as he lifted my leg for me.

“Those baths must have helped,” Zane agreed as he pushed on my hamstring and ankle.

Zane had made me take a bath with Epsom salts and other additives last night. At first, I had protested because I didn’t think I could relax enough to enjoy it. Now I was glad I had listened to him.

“They really did,” I agreed. “Maybe it should be a nightly thing.”

“I’ll join you tonight,” Zane flirted.

“As if I would say no.” I laughed as he helped me transition to my other leg.

Sunrise by RAIGN came on, and I closed my eyes and just allowed my body to do what it knew best. In my head, I pictured

myself going through all the movements necessary to nail the routine.

I realized the longer we stretched, the more my nerves started to lessen. It seemed like we barely warmed up before Martin, Grady, and Jack came back into the room, followed by a beautiful petite African American woman.

“Peyton and Zane,” Mr. Brady grinned as he handed Sal his coffee, “sorry about the chaos this morning. Normally we’re much more organized. This is Naila.” He pointed to the beautiful woman. “She’s one of our choreographers on my staff. If we decide to hire you, she’ll be teaching you the steps to the music video. By the end of the day, if you’re in, we hope you have all the moves down. You already met Grady, from Uncaged. Jack is their manager—”

The door opened again, admitting another man.

“—and Oscar here is part of the record label,” Martin added with a grin at the timing.

“It’s nice meeting you all,” Zane and I said simultaneously.

Zane stepped forward to shake their hands, and I followed suit.

“Thank you for the opportunity,” I added.

“Let’s hope it was worth our time,” Oscar sternly quipped as he took a seat behind a meeting-like table.

Everyone else took a seat, and soon the opening notes of *Lovely* by Billie Eilish and Khalid were surrounding us. My troubled, worried thoughts melted away—my only focus was the music, my movements, and Zane. Everything else faded away.

I lost myself completely, embracing the natural way Zane and I moved together. Today, I was ready for the connection Zane had added to the number on Saturday. I emoted my own emotions as we moved fluidly as one. I could feel how our bodies complemented each other.

Today, our most difficult leap, throw, and catch seemed effortless. It was as if I gained the confidence I had lost, as if my mind had convinced my body that we’d already executed it flawlessly and could continue doing so. My body wasn’t where I wanted it to be yet, and I knew I have more work to do, but my mind was convincing me that it still worked.

When the song ended, I was breathing heavily. My body shook with excitement and nerves as I rode the adrenaline wave. Zane's body vibrated slightly, too, as he embraced me from behind. He didn't make a move to step away. We didn't bow or make a grand exit.

We simply stood there and waited for the verdict.

●

"One, two, one, two, three four," Naila barked as she clapped.

I executed the movements for the fourth time.

After we finished our dance, I had seen the excitement in Martin Brady's and Naila's eyes. Oscar had stood up and motioned for the others to follow him. After several excruciating minutes later, only Naila and Martin had returned to the room. They informed us that we were hired and had the rest of the morning to learn the steps.

Sometime after lunch, the rest of the cast would be joining us. Martin had told us to buckle in for a long, strenuous day, but instead of finding the thought daunting, I embraced the new challenge. At the moment, I felt no pain or limitations with my body. I was running on an adrenaline high like no other.

"Good, good," she praised. "Now, into an aerial."

I finished my turns and took a few quick steps to gain the momentum I would need to complete the move. After I did my aerial, I then scrambled up the scaffolding they had brought in.

"Now, follow me." Naila did a series of steps, and I attempted to mirror her movements. "Again." Naila did the steps once more.

I nodded and did it again on the four-foot by eight-foot planks of wood. I barely even noticed my small "stage." It was almost surreal having such a creative choreographer teaching me choreography for a music video. I still felt like I was going to wake up from a dream; the whole thing was so amazing and unreal.

And Naila? She and I just clicked. Her way of being firm, task-driven, yet encouraging was the type of choreographer I worked best with. She seemed to understand the best way to teach me almost immediately. Zane seemed to have taken to her just as well as I had.

Zane didn't have as many parts as I did but continued to silently encourage me and root for me on the sidelines when he wasn't needed.

She continued to teach us, and I soaked it all in. When she started playing *Bloodfeathers* by Uncaged from the top, I was totally immersed in the lyrics and movements. I felt the song not just with my body but with my soul. I felt the angst, the desire. The fear and hope.

I wanted to know who had written it. It resonated deep within me. Essentially, the song is about a man who finds an injured girl and falls deeply in love with her. The writer creatively decided to liken the man and woman to a bird collector and his bird. I was to play the part of the bird, and Zane would be my "savior/handler."

In the dance, Zane, enamored by me, was to place me in a cage with the other birds he'd collected over time. When I'd begin to heal from my original injuries, he wouldn't want to let me go, so he would clip my wings, which results in accidentally trimming my blood feathers, injuring me once again.

Feeling remorse, he would decide to separate himself from me, doting on the other birds in his care, as I watched on. My anger and hurt would then cause me to want to escape and fly free. But realizing I couldn't fly, I would fall into a depression. My wings would grow back, and later he'd finally set me free.

Once I gained my freedom, I'd realize I didn't want it after all. I wanted to be with my collector. I'd return to his side, but this time he wouldn't try to clip my wings. Instead, he'd allow me to come and go as I pleased, where I'd be content to stay with him forever.

Right now, I felt like I was playing Zane's role. I felt like my injured bird was Crew. Maybe the more I had clung to him, the more he had desired his freedom. Only he had escaped, and I could only hope he would return to me one day.

"There, there!" Naila cried out. I stumbled to a stop. "Where did you go, Peyton?"

I looked at her in confusion as the last notes of the song faded out. I was out of breath, and a subtle sheen of sweat was rolling down my back and face.

"What do you mean?" I inquired as I fixed my messy bun.

"It was like you were in your own world but so connected to ours," Naila stated.

I cleared my throat somewhat uncomfortably. I didn't know if she was displeased with me or wanted me to continue what I was doing.

"When I dance, I try to get lost in the lyrics," I explained. "I attempted to portray the injured bird and how she falls in love with the bird collector."

Naila's face glows with a smile. "That was perfect. You need to continue that way of thinking when you're in practice, especially when the cameras are rolling. And Zane," she calls, looking at him, "I love the chemistry you have together. I have no doubt you are totally enamored with her on and off the stage. I just need to feel more anguish and pain from you when you release Peyton. Got it?"

"I can do that." Zane nodded as he took a long draw from his water bottle. I squeezed his hand and gave him a small smile.

"The others should be here in an hour, plus our lunch is here," Naila continued. "Let's recharge and hit it hard again after lunch. I have a feeling we can be out of here by six, seven at the latest if all goes well." Naila then turned and exited the room.

Zane and I looked at each other, our wide grins matching. He picked me up and twirled me around.

"This is exciting, yeah?" he trilled.

"To put it lightly," I leaned in and brushed my lips against his. "I'm so happy you're here with me."

"Me, too." Zane brushed his lips against mine but took it a step further by running his tongue across my lips.

I opened my mouth, loving the feel of his tongue sliding against mine. He weaved his hand in my hair to tilt my head back while his other hand gripped my hips. I moaned against his lips as I felt my body melt against him. I didn't even care that we were both sweaty and gross. It was slightly erotic in a way, and suddenly I wanted to see how quickly we could find a release. Right now, a quickie sounded wonderful.

"Food!" Naila yelled at us from down the hall. "You need the energy, both of you."

We looked at each other and laughed once more as we went in the direction of her yell.

"Maybe we can quickly eat and find a quiet place before the others get here," I told him wickedly.

He looked at me in surprise before he started laughing. “I like your way of thinking. Where there’s a will, there’s definitely a way. And I feel a lot of will.”

I giggled and interlaced his fingers with mine. “Think Naila will notice us missing for ten, maybe fifteen minutes?”

“I can have us both there in ten,” Zane said with confidence.

“Prove it,” I saucily challenged as I winked at him.

26

•

Karma

“Okay, let’s take a break,” Naila smiled. “I’m going to see if our lunch was delivered. Hydrate,” she reminded us before going out of the room.

I didn’t hesitate to make a beeline for my bag. As each day passed, I realized my throat seemed to be healing. My voice wasn’t as raspy. I realized the more water I drank and hot tea with lemon and honey, the better. Both helped significantly.

I took a long drink from my water bottle. I was a “good” kind of tired. I looked over at Zane and saw the same contentment in his smile. I was on such a high.

I leaned down to check my phone and saw a lot of text messages. Most of them were from the guys congratulating me on getting the spot. I scoffed when I saw Madison’s good luck text. I knew she was trying to still work her way into my good graces.

I was about to put my phone away when I noticed I had missed a message. I stilled when I saw Crew’s name.

Crew: You can’t believe everything that people tell you, Angel. Please trust me.

I frowned recalling the conversation we’d had. He seemed just as evasive now as he had been that night. I didn’t understand why he wanted me to trust him. What was he up to? Was he in trouble?

“What does this even mean?” I groused as I showed Zane.

Zane read the text over my shoulder. “He texted me essentially the same thing.” Zane sighed. “He said he’s *not* back with Jana and said they were just at the same party. I know in the past, when he was going through stuff, he’d withdraw from us.” He gave me a tender look, reassuring me. “He’ll come back when he’s sorted out everything in his head, Peyton.”

I felt tense and wondered what Crew was up to. I hated not seeing him or talking to him. It was like a vital piece of my heart was

missing. But I also didn't want to force myself on him if he needed the space to clear his head.

I texted him back.

Peyton: Please tell me you're okay. Why aren't you talking to any of us?

I didn't have to wait long before he responded.

Crew: I am. I just need some time. Please, just trust me.

I let out a sound between a growl and a snort. His lack of words and details aggravated me. I wanted to unleash all the frustration I felt. I wanted to let him know his absence was hurting me. Even though a small piece of me was comforted by him finally responding to me, I felt like I deserved more of an explanation.

"Lunch, is here," Naila came back into the room. "Let's refuel our bodies and rest before the others get here."

"Thanks, we'll be right there," Zane smiled at Naila.

She turned and left. Zane embraced me from behind me and kissed my shoulder. "We're just going to have to continue praying he's okay and hope he'll work this out soon."

Zane seemed so calm, and I tried to soak in his energy. He had known Crew forever, knew his behaviors and patterns. So, I decided to take a cue from him. If Zane wasn't worried, then maybe I shouldn't be either.

I nodded, took a deep breath in, and forced myself to let go. I couldn't work myself up into an anxious state. I had to trust Crew like he asked me to.

●

He pinned my hands against the stall door and kissed the sides of my neck from behind. "You're sure you want it quick?" he husked in my ear.

"Yes," I mewled when his large hands lightly skimmed my stomach.

The nerves in my skin jumped acutely to each gentle brush. I pushed my rear back into Zane's hips. I could feel how hard he was and knew he was just as excited. I purposely gyrated my hips on him, teasing him further.

"Hurry," I let out a sound similar to a moan and command.

He grabbed the waist of my shorts and shoved them down my hips. They pooled into a heap at my feet, and I stepped only one foot out of them just in case we had to make a hasty cover-up. I hadn't really thought Zane would take me up on a quickie, but the moment Naila had to leave the room to take a phone call, we hastily took a few more bites of our quinoa power bowls—a delicious concoction of quinoa, bacon, spinach, cherry tomatoes, avocado, and hard boil eggs. However, I felt an unbearable yearning to feel and have Zane inside me.

Maybe it was because when we danced today, it had felt a lot like foreplay. Or perhaps it felt like I needed an additional release from all the tension my mind produced when I allowed my thoughts to wander. There were very few things I thought I could control in my life, and maybe this was one.

"Let me make sure you're ready." He chuckled against my cheek.

He trailed his lips, tongue, and teeth against the sensitive skin of my nape. My fingers balled into a fist as he traced a path to my inner thighs. I was already so turned on, and all we did was exchange a few kisses and dirty words.

"Shit, you're more than ready," he moaned as he swiped a finger over my slit.

"I could have told you that," I groaned playfully. "Now, get it in there so they don't notice we're missing."

In truth, it was just Naila that I was concerned about. Martin, Jack, Oscar, and Grady had left. Martin had left his assistant, Camille, behind, but she was in her office getting other necessary things completed for the music video. Naila, Zane, and I had been left alone for the most part since we convinced Sal to take a break.

Sal seemed reluctant to leave the studio at first, but after reassuring him, we convinced him to go sightseeing. Apparently, a few of Uncage's security were already stationed on the floor, and his presence wasn't necessary. I didn't want him to go crazy watching us practice. Plus, we promised I wouldn't leave the floor for any reason.

My thoughts were quickly brought back to the present when Zane entered me in one smooth, hard thrust. I lowered my face, tucking it into my shoulder, simultaneously whimpering and moaning.

He splayed one of his large hands over my stomach and pulled my mouth to him with the other.

It was hot but awkward and messy as our tongues dueled with one another. We swallowed each other's moans and gasps. Zane's movements were frantic and rough, and I loved every blissful second of it.

"I'm gonna come," he warned me before slipping his hand to the juncture between my thighs.

His long, deft fingers found me with ease. He rubbed my clit with feverish intent. He applied the perfect amount of pressure, and I felt precariously close to losing it, too. I think I had part exhibitionist in me—the danger of possibly getting caught ramped up my libido to intense heights.

"Like that," I encouraged him in a breathy moan as he circled my clit.

"I'm coming," he moaned before lowering his head to my neck.

He ground hard and deep inside me, and I felt the warmth of his seed as he spilled into me. His fingers and the new angle he pounded into me brought me to my own orgasm. One moment I was chasing it, and the next I felt like a bunch of mini-explosions had gone off. I tried to stifle my cries of euphoria as bright spots exploded behind my closed eyes.

"Fuck," Zane muttered. "That was hot."

I felt the loss of his presence the instant he slipped out of me and away. I made a sound of displeasure, wishing I could cherish the moment for a few more seconds. He chuckled at me before I felt toilet paper between my shaking thighs.

"We need to do that again," I agreed on a blissful sigh.

"Anytime, beautiful." He kissed the side of my neck.

Zane finished cleaning the inside of my thighs. I almost felt drunk as I smiled at his thoughtfulness. The endorphins and oxytocin were wreaking havoc on my body as I reached down and pulled back on my panties and boy-shorts. I rated hot, illicit sex in a public restroom a nine-point five. It would have been a perfect ten if I could've savored the sex-high longer. Instead, we had to get back out there and behave as if we hadn't snuck away for a quickie.

“Go ahead and get out there. I’m going to wash up real quick.” I pulled Zane’s mouth down to mine.

He gave me a dopey smile before kissing me. He lightly smacked my butt before slipping out of the stall.

“Hey!” I mock-protested. His chuckle followed him out the door.

I quickly relieved myself. Then I made my way over to the sink that was in the handicap bathroom stall and inspected myself. My cheeks were flushed, and my green eyes overly bright. I couldn’t do anything about my eyes, but maybe if I splashed my face with cold water, it would help a little? I turned on the faucet and splashed my face, shivering slightly at the shock of it but inwardly smiling at the same time.

I dried my face with paper towels and headed to the stall door. The bolt clicked loudly at the same time I heard the bathroom door push open. I was getting ready to call out to Zane but, luckily, refrained at the last second. I definitely didn’t recognize the brown leather and suede men’s ankle boots. I hastily took a few steps back as they paused by my stall.

I quietly cursed. There was a reason we chose the men’s restroom. There were no other men in the building, and we didn’t want Naila or Camille walking in on us. It would be just my luck that I get caught in the men's bathroom the first time I decide to be adventurous. I was a horrible liar, so I couldn’t pretend I hadn’t noticed the sign or the urinals indicating that this was a men’s restroom.

The shoes moved forward, and I tried to cover my mouth and nose as if I were a heavy breather. I prayed they hadn’t noticed my moccasin-clad feet by the stall door. My feet were average by women’s standards but tiny compared to a man’s.

I heard the unmistakable sound of someone urinating, and the seconds felt like hours had passed. I listened to the urinal flush, then footsteps to the sink. The sink began to run, and I inwardly cursed whoever it was. I knew good-hygiene practice demanded you wash them for a minimum of twenty seconds. Hell, I remembered the teacher making me sing the A-B-C’s in pre-school, but this man was taking an excessive amount of time. I swear I could sing the A-B-C

song five times before he stopped. I heard the whirl of the automatic hand towel dispenser and secretly cursed this guy again. What the hell was taking so long?!

Finally, the door opened. I took a deep gasping breath, not realizing I had been holding my it a little too well. Then I counted to ten before quickly sliding the bolt in the door and making my way out. I yanked the door open and rushed out the door, only to stumble into a broad chest.

“Shit, sorry,” I mumbled.

“What were you doing in there?” a harsh masculine voice demanded at the same time Zane came rushing forward.

“Peyton, I got a refill on your water bottle,” Zane looked at me with panic in his eyes.

I looked up into the man’s angry cobalt-blue eyes. I registered the ash-blond hair styled in the disconnected pompadour: sides shorn close to his head, the top half longer and swept to the side. He would be a hot-looking man if he didn’t look so pissed off. A second later, I recognized him as one of the identical twins of Uncaged.

To affirm my theory, his brother came strolling out of one of the offices. “What’s going on?” he asked as he threw a handful of M&M’s in his mouth.

I’d met identical twins before; typically, they always seemed to strive to embrace their own identities, and naturally, clothing was one of those ways. But these men were dressed identically, save their ribbed Henleys. One wore gray while the other wore white. Their jeans and shoes were exactly the same.

“That’s what I wanted to know,” Angry Twin sneered. “This girl was hiding in the men’s bathroom. Let me see it.” He held out his hand.

I changed my mind. Not all the men in Uncaged were as nice as Grady. This man was a Summer’s Eve bottle. The industrial sized one, at that.

“See what?” My embarrassment was quickly replaced with ire.

I didn’t know what he thought I had been doing, but his anger was unwarranted. So I had a quickie in the bathroom, but according to what I just read during lunch, Laken and Ayden−AKA Layden− of Uncaged were no angels. They had at least one sex-tape out there

where they publicly had sex with a girl together. How dare he judge me!

“Your phone,” he snapped.

“It’s in my bag,” I snapped back.

I really wanted this opportunity. I needed it, in fact. It was the escape I truly needed, but I refused to be talked down to and treated like a deviant.

“Um, I think you’re misreading this,” Zane coughed out, blushing.

I had never seen him blush. He was always so calm and controlled with his emotions.

“We, I mean, *I*…” Zane hesitated as he looked at me apologetically.

“What?” Angry Twin the snapped at the same time the other twin began to laugh uproariously.

The chocolate-chomping twin sauntered forward and clapped the angry-confused twin's shoulder. “Hey, Ay?” he said between laughter. “I saw this one leaving the bathroom rather flushed moments before you entered. I think they were together before you went in.”

I surmised that Angry Twin was Ayden.

“Did you take pictures of me?” Ayden snarled, obviously not understanding what his twin had correctly surmised.

“I don’t have anything to take pictures of you *with*.” My face was warm, but my voice still held a note of indignation. I patted myself down and slowly twirled. In my dance outfit, there was nowhere I could hide my phone. I had put it back in my bag before Zane and I ran off to the restrooms.

“Bro,” Laken continued laughing at my expense. “They were hooking up and you probably got their right afterward.”

I couldn’t help but cover my face. “Laken’s right,” I muttered. “I was coming out of the stall while you came in.”

“How do you know she isn’t lying?” Ayden hissed. “She’s not the first, or the last, to try and proposition us.”

I had felt anger at first at his accusations but now I kind of pitied him. Pieces began to fall into place. Their last lead dancer was found in one of their hotel rooms recently. I was sure it wasn’t the

first time it, either, nor the last. They may have chosen to pursue a career in music, but it didn't give people the right to invade their privacy.

I might not have chosen getting thrust into the limelight after my abduction, but I understood his struggle. It was hard to know who to trust in a world full of wolves. I wasn't anywhere near their level of fame, and people were always secretly taping me or taking pictures of me. David and Grandpa were shielding me from the brunt of my notoriety, but I wasn't oblivious that my private life was continually being exploited.

The only difference was, eventually, I would literally and figuratively be yesterday's news. However, these men would always be exploited as long as they stayed in their chosen careers. I could sympathize with that to a degree. It was a shame that they couldn't do anything without fear of being scrutinized.

"I assure you I am happily dating six men and have no desire to proposition you," I blurted out in shock and humiliation. "No matter how attractive and talented you are." Word vomit continued to spew from my mouth. "I'm not interested in any way, shape, or form. I would never dream of violating your privacy in any way, either."

Legally, I really couldn't. Zane and I had already signed our non-disclosure agreements. We could tell our families who we were working for. However, we couldn't tell them any details about the choreography until after it was released. Also, if we were to encounter any of the guys, we weren't permitted to discuss them beyond a professional capacity.

"A music video is good for my career," I continued. "Any rumors with my name and anyone famous will never get the vultures away from me. Honestly, I didn't, nor would I, try to invade your personal space like that. I know what it's like living in a fishbowl, and I've only experienced it for the last few weeks."

Laken continued to chuckle, muttering about quickies and the wrong place at the wrong time. I was glad he found humor in the situation because I sure didn't. Yes, they were identical, but I immediately pegged this twin as the carefree one. He reminded me of a cross between my Paxton and Golden.

Ayden−the serious twin− continued to look at me with an intensity that almost made me squirm. “You do look familiar. Who are you?” He placed his hands on his hips and suspiciously looked at me.

“She’s our new lead dancer,” Grady interjected as he came around the corner. “The rest of the crew is trickling in. Zane and Peyton, I think they’ll be looking for you shortly.”

“But—” Ayden began to growl at the same time Grady brushed past me and stood in front of him.

He began murmuring something to him, but I couldn’t hear his words as Zane linked his fingers through mine and pulled me away.

“I’m so sorry,” Zane muttered to me. “He must have come from the opposite direction. I never even saw him! I wouldn’t have left you in there if I’d seen him walk in.”

“It’s okay,” I murmured in return. “It wasn’t your fault in any way.”

I was shaking from the rush of emotions, but I didn’t blame Zane in any way. I was the one who had propositioned him into a quickie. It had been my decision, and I knew there were risks. I just hadn’t factored in a band member− I was still hopefully dancing for−walking in on me when I was about to leave.

In retrospect, I probably should have held my tongue better. I should have quickly apologized and explained the situation to Ayden. I shouldn’t have allowed his accusations to rile me up and trigger my word vomit.

Now I just prayed that I hadn’t ruined not only my chance for an amazing opportunity but Zane’s as well. This may have never been his dream, but I knew he was just as excited as I was to perform in a well-known band's music video.

●

“What the fuck are you doing here?” a nasty feminine voice snarled behind me.

“Excuse me?” Zane stood up to his full height. “Who the hell do you think you’re talking to that way?”

It took me a second to realize the woman was addressing me. As Grady said, the dancers had been trickling in when Zane and I

returned to the dance room. I was busy nervously waiting to see if I was going to be fired as Zane and I warmed back up.

I turned and my eyes widened slightly. I immediately recognized the beauty before me. She was around my height, and her build was similar to mine. However, she was blessed with bigger breasts than mine. Her long black hair was down and reached nearly to her waist. Her skin was flawlessly beautiful and reminiscent of Snow White, eyes an almond-shaped and a unique bluish-gray hue. On the outside, she was model-beautiful with the natural grace of a dancer. Unfortunately, her insides were black as night.

Clementine was the reason I missed out on my last opportunity to be in a music video. She had accused me of stealing her jewelry. They found the missing piece in my locker, but it wasn't until after the competition that landed her the part that the truth was discovered. She had set me up. She had intentionally placed the jewelry in my locker. I was nearly kicked out of my school because of her.

I unconsciously rubbed the scar below my breast that I received the weekend I was supposed to be at the competition. She never faced any repercussions because she never returned to school. Her parents had hired her an agent and a private dance teacher.

"I'm not talking to you, sexy," she nearly purred.

I had seen many men fall over themselves when she turned *it* on. She was an accomplished actor and seemed to have a way of weaving her wiles around any man she desired. Hell, they had worked on Lucas, and he knew how her actions had affected me.

I found out she had hooked up with Lucas, hoping to "steal" him away, believing he was my boyfriend just because we were always with each other. I hadn't been angry that they'd hooked up; I had felt betrayed by Lucas because he, of all people, understood how she had derailed my life.

"You're barking up the wrong tree." Zane's lip curled with barely concealed contempt as he put his arm around my shoulder. "I'm wondering why you would come in here being so vile to my girl."

Clementine smiled and had a mask of wholesome innocence plastered across her face. She casually placed a well-manicured

hand on Zane's bicep and batted her long sooty eyelashes up at him. Her acting skills were on point. It appeared her career taking off had benefited her in many ways.

After she did the music video, she had guest-starred on a popular crime show. I also heard rumors she was being considered for a well-known reality dancing show. It used to be hard hearing about her accomplishments and living the life I hoped to have one day.

Zane shrugged her hands off his bicep and pulled me in closer. I saw Clementine's eyes narrow for a moment. She was deviously calculating once more.

"Oh, sexy," Clementine cooed. "Peyton and I are old friends. I was just kidding."

If I didn't know Clementine as well as I did, I would gobble up her lies. However, I knew her instant attraction to Zane had her on her best behavior. She had every confidence that she could lure him into her bed by the end of the night. There was no exaggeration when I say she had done it numerous times. I had seen her lure men into a hook-up that were "happy" in their relationships. She was a queen of manipulation.

"We were never friends," I said cooly before looking up at Zane.

He seemed unmoved by her beauty and flirting, and that gave me a thrill like no other. It was beyond flattering to feel like you were the center of a man's attention, surrounded by beautiful people. Clementine wasn't the first woman to approach Zane since we entered the room.

Most of them were curious about my presence. At the same time, the others seemed to want to flirt with Zane. A few of them even asked about the hotel he was staying in and asking us if we wanted to go out with them afterward. I wasn't naïve. I was included in the invitations, but with twenty girls and four guys, these bitches were thirsty.

"She placed her jewelry in my locker at my previous school and accused me of stealing it," I informed him.

"The one who hooked up with Lucas?" Zane said as understanding dawned.

“The same,” I confirmed as realization struck me.

There were a handful of bold females here, but only one of them was brazen enough to sneak into Ayden and Laken’s hotel room. She was also crazy talented. She had been my true competition at my last school. We were continually competing for the solo and lead spots.

Unlike her, I thrived on the competition. It pushed me to train harder. It forced me to push my limits continually. I never contemplated sabotaging her career to further my own. I had wanted to achieve success the right way. She hadn’t. She would do anything and everything to ensure she rose to the top.

“I believe karma is cashing in on a previous bad deed.” I smiled at Zane.

“What does that mean?” Clementine hissed. “Why are you here?”

I crossed my arms over my chest and shrugged. I hoped my assumptions were correct. How befitting would it be that I took the role originally intended for Clementine? It would be just another way for fate to prove how fickle it could be. One moment you thought you had your life planned out and everything was falling into place, and the next moment it was showing you that it could change on a dime.

It made me think of my last opportunity. It made me wonder once again why I had been abducted and left with the scars so deeply embedded in me emotionally, physically, and mentally. Lastly, it made me think about Crew.

An ache formed in my chest once more. He had become one of my rocks. He helped me keep afloat when I feared I would drown. I thought my love was enough for him. Obviously, it hadn’t been if he could ghost me so easily.

“Oh, lovely!” Naila came into the room, clapping her hands pulling me from my maudlin thoughts. “It looks like everyone’s here. Everyone take your place. A week from today, showtime, ladies, and gents. A few of the guys were kind enough to agree to spend some time with us today to give us a better idea about what to expect on the day-of.”

I was too embarrassed to look up when I noticed Grady, Laken, and Ayden entering the room. I just prayed Ayden believed

me. Last time, I could see my future. Today I got to taste it, and it tasted so good.

Zane kissed my temple before I made my way to my starting point. I realized that Clementine mirrored my movements and was thoroughly confused until a sardonic laugh came from the scaffolding.

Ayden was sitting on the scaffolding as two girls flanked him. He had a guitar in his hand and looked perfectly at ease. He didn't even seem to notice how hungrily the girls were watching him.

"Oh, sweetie," Ayden said coldly. "Did we forget to tell you that you'll be back here with these girls and guys?"

I turned and felt my stomach drop until I realized he was talking to Clementine.

"What?" Clementine nearly screeched. "With the backup dancers? Why?" She glared in accusation like I had a hand in her… demotion.

Laken took a few steps forward, and I noticed he and his brother had changed into plain V-neck black t-shirts. I didn't know how I could tell them apart, but I could.

"You broke into our room and expected us to be okay with that? You told our girlfriend that we invited you back," Laken hissed.

He wasn't laughing any longer, and I realized he wasn't as untouched with life as he pretended to be. My first impression of him was that he was carefree and laughed a lot. Now I understood. Like most people, if he was pushed enough, he could bare his teeth.

Wait. Had he said *our* girlfriend?

I had read that the guys were notorious playboys. Many names had been linked to theirs in the last year alone. Except Grady, who seemed to keep all his escapades and women under lock and key.

Had a woman finally managed to pin down the guys enough for them to care what she thought of them?

"It was a misunderstanding," Clementine simpered. "I told you one already. One of your roadies gave me your keycard and a note asking me back to your room."

"I don't think so," Laken sneered. "I think you paid someone to give you our keycard. However, we can't prove it; otherwise, you

would have been long gone by now."

I wanted to tell Laken he should trust his gut because she was a master manipulator. I wanted to confirm his suspicions and tell him it was her MO. That she had done something similar in the past, and her parents hand enough money to brush all her transgressions away.

Laken turned on his heel and began to stalk to the other side of the room when Clementine reached out and grabbed his arm. "Please, Ayden, don't punish me for something I didn't do. I'm the best lead you could cast."

Her eyes welled with tears, and I wanted to clap for her moving performance. Not.

"*Laken*," I corrected her instead. "At least call him by the right name."

I didn't know why I had corrected her. Maybe because reporters had called me by Ava and Claire's name. They were so hungry for a scoop that some of them hadn't even bothered learning my name. I looked like the younger version of Ava, true. However, Claire and I appeared similar, but even separated, you could tell us apart. They had stripped away my identity days, *weeks*, after I had been dehumanized by my kidnappers for eighteen very long days.

Laken looked over at me in surprise but quickly masked it. I was confused by the look before Grady took a few steps forward.

"Ms. Valentine, please don't embarrass yourself further. Be thankful we don't have sufficient enough evidence to prove your transgressions. We found the best lead for our music video. Take your place or leave," Grady clipped out.

"Her?" Clementine scoffed between her tears, looking at me, then back to Grady. "You do realize she placed fourth at her last competition for her solo performance. Everyone who knows our world realizes she's broken. She's never going to be the same again. Whatever happened when she was 'taken,'" she made air quotes with her fingers, "fucked her head up. She's going to crumble when she's in front of the camera."

For a moment, I wondered how she would have known that. It wasn't like she competed anymore. Then I felt a tightness in my

chest as I felt all eyes on me. The little voice in the back of my head that fed all my insecurities was agreeing with her loudly.

None of these people knew what I'd gone through. None of these people were there. Yet, there was a portion of society that still doubted I had been taken to begin with. Some of them speculated that I had run away. It didn't help that Ava or Claire never named Tormentor as one of our abductors. They both insisted that they had run away.

Ava had, but Claire hadn't, and now I looked like a liar because my story didn't match theirs, and it had been leaked to the press. I felt like this incident would follow me my whole life. When would people stop judging me by that horrific time?

Dancing and what happened to me were two separate parts of my life. When would people stop reminding me of my past when I wanted nothing to do with it?

I felt panic begin to set in.

I still didn't know why my panic attacks seemed to strike at random. There seemed to be no definitive trigger. Sometimes I was immune to the stares, whispers, and aggression. Then other times, I felt like, out of nowhere, the breath was ripped from my chest. I felt like the world was closing in, and my vision began to darken.

I thought I had begun to manage them. I thought I had control over my attacks and anxiety. I guess I was wrong.

Zane snarled and stalked forward. "She took first in her duet, and her solo was given to her the morning of the competition."

His words came from afar, but his hand on mine seemed to break through the dark haze. He squeezed it hard and placed it against his chest, and I realized he was trying to save me. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath in.

I felt Zane twirl my ring on my finger, and I was reminded of a technique I had read online. Find an object and focus on it. I felt the coolness of my ring. I felt the way Zane twirled it like I had done a thousand times. I felt the rapid beating of his chest. I remembered how Paxton had given it to me, replacing the ring Madison had given me.

Slowly the tightness began to dissipate, and forgotten words whispered through my mind.

This too shall pass.

This too shall pass.

I had faced several demons in my life, and I had risen each time. Sure, this last one had taken longer and came with a whole boatload more scars, but I knew I was a survivor. I was born with a stacked deck, yet I had proven myself time and time again.

This too shall pass.

My mind cleared, and my breathing was back to normal.

“I think that just proves I’m the best person for the part,” I stared impassively at Clementine.

I saw the glee in her eyes. I saw how, by publicly humiliating me, she thought she could tear me down, only for her to rise above once again. She wanted to use me as a stepping stone again. Well, I had news for her. Of all my demons, she was the smallest.

“I can connect to the song better than most, especially you,” I informed her. “When have you ever struggled, Clem? Your life has always been handed to you. Have you ever listened to the lyrics of the song? Can you truly connect to the lyrics and give the song any justice if you can’t even understand them?”

“Well said,” Grady murmured. “Ms. Valentine. You may leave. I think your services are no longer needed here. If you plan to stay in the music industry, I suggest you reconsider. It’s a small world in many ways, and I’m sure some of our friends would wonder why we fired you.”

A myriad of emotions crossed Clementine's features. Fear, disgust, anger, and finally disdain.

“Oh, honey,” Clementine said condescendingly, “my agent gets numerous phone calls a day. I didn’t need this job, nor do I want it. My agent suggested it. Now I’m glad I don’t have to waste any more time on your lousy production. Your music sucks, and you’ll see how my career will continue while all your little one-hit wonders soon fade.”

With that, she turned and left. The silence was deafening in the room until a guitar began to play. The beginning notes of *Bloodfeathers* rang through and echoed off the room walls, and I did what I always did. I got lost in the music and allowed my feet to carry me away.

I was sure Clementine would soon find out how vicious karma could be. She had reaped so much bad into the world. She was bound to sow it eventually.

27

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Warnings and Demands

“Ready?” Sal asked me as I stepped out into the bright sunlight.

“I am,” I confirmed, pulling my olive-green hooded military-style jacket close.

It was wickedly cold, and a tremor wracked my body from the chill the wind created as it caressed my skin, which was still slightly overheated from dancing. Anya had been relentless today.

She didn’t care that my plate was already full with the music video, school, and recovering. She had Renee, Kayley, and I competing for the lead in our next group number and a solo. She also planned for Zane and me to do another duet at our next competition. For once in my life− okay, maybe the second time− I tried to give up a solo or the lead.

I knew my limitations, and I really didn’t want to be worn down. Zane and I killed the dance routine yesterday for the music video. By the end of rehearsal, we had a few dancers—plus Laken, Ayden, and Grady—firmly in our corner. They seemed just as excited as we were, and I counted down the days until we were back in the city.

“It’s getting colder out,” Sal grumbled. “Maybe you should get a thicker coat.”

I grinned at his concern and realized for the first time since my return there wasn’t a spattering of reporters accosting us as we approached the vehicle.

Renee snorted, and I rolled my eyes at her. She had already chastised me for my lack of winter wear. I never liked puffy oversized coats, but I had to admit she looked unaffected and cozy in her ski-like coat.

I was so relieved and happy to see her back today. I could tell she was still shaken by what she’d witnessed, but she seemed a lot better than the last time I had seen her. Her dad had taken her away

to a little lake house over the weekend, and the reconvening with nature and the solitude seemed to have done wonders for her.

“I’ll order one today,” I reassured them. “Can we stop off at the Chinese take-out place, too? The guys placed an order and asked us to grab it. They also placed an order for General Tso’s and a large wonton egg drop soup for you, Sal. Renee, they ordered you almond chicken with chicken-fried rice.”

“You guys are going to spoil me,” Sal half-heartedly grumbled.

“I packed my lunch,” Renee attempted to protest as well.

I laughed. “What can I say? You’re an amazing Shadow, and the guys like you. And Ray, your lunch can keep. The guys know how much you love your Chinese.”

Renee just grinned and shrugged. The guys were just as happy as her return as I was, so they asked me to pick up food for everyone, knowing how much Renee loved her Chinese food.

They had grown to like her and had become close to her in my absence, learning more about her. She had stepped up and helped them in their time of need, and they were determined to “pay” her back.

Maisie had grown to love her as well. She had been asking about her just the other day. I knew she wanted a play date with her Candyland opponent. Apparently, Renee had introduced her to the game, and she was now obsessed. According to Maisie, none of us “knew how to play” when she challenged us. I suspected that she hated losing. Renee had taken it easy on her, while we were unwilling to “allow” her to win.

Sal chuckled and shook his head at me before he cleared his throat. “Des is on duty Monday and Tuesday, but if you want to switch us out, you can.”

I was confused why he was telling me their schedule. The guys traded off watching me, and occasionally their schedules overlapped. I thought it was slight overkill to have them hovering, especially when we were at home and mostly hanging out.

They rarely informed me about their schedules and worked it out between themselves. Grandpa and David were the only ones that seemed to care about their exact itineraries with my care. Then realization dawned on me.

“Aww, does someone have a man-crush?” I crowed. “Was it Grady, Laken, or Ayden you liked the most?”

Sal had returned to watch the last few hours of practice with Uncaged. Every time I looked over at him, I could see the awe in his eyes. He was the picture of stoic professionalism to an outsider, but I had grown to know him, so I was able to notice the slight changes in his mannerisms.

I climbed into the passenger seat and immediately turned on the seat warmers. I sighed in bliss as the warmth enveloped me. Sal had clearly started the vehicle for our comfort before class ended.

I looked over at Sal as he climbed behind the wheel. I never thought such a big burly man could blush, but I clearly saw the red in his cheeks. That only made me laugh harder.

“Who wouldn’t!” Renee gushed. “You are so lucky. I wish I could go, just to watch. Plus, I just want to lick Milo. Just once.”

Sal and I both looked over our shoulders in shock and surprise. Renee was so shy and rarely talked, let alone enthused about a man to us.

“What?” Renee said with a guileless shrug. “I’m a teenage girl with hormones.” She sniffed with mock hurt. “Just because I haven’t expressed interest in any of the boys at our school doesn’t mean I don’t notice men. Plus, I’ve been following Uncaged since they were the opening acts for the big dogs. Now *they're* the big dogs, and it’s well deserved. They’re crazy talented!” She looked at me seriously. “Have you really listened to their music? Listen to Milo in *Another Sunrise* and tell me you don’t fall in love with him. Just a little.”

I hadn’t met Milo, but he was the lead vocalist in Uncaged. He also played the guitar and wrote a good number of their songs. I had been impressed to find out he and Grady wrote all their songs.

“I did download all their albums last night,” I admitted. “Sal, Zane, and I made it to their second album on the drive home. Which one is *Another Sunrise* on?”

“*Taking Flight*,” Renee said without hesitation. “Track ten.”

I laughed and looked over at Sal. He seemed impressed by her fandom. I hadn’t failed to notice that he sang to most of the songs we had listened to last night. Zane and I had teased him relentlessly over it.

“So, Sal,” I teased. “Who do *you* want to lick?”

“I am one hundred percent straight. Not that there’s anything wrong if I wasn’t,” Sal grumbled. “Des doesn’t listen to anything but country. He has no clue who Uncaged is. I made him listen to five of their number one hits, and he was still oblivious. He’ll probably be bored out of his mind.”

My stomach hurt from all the laughter spewing from my mouth, and tears were rolling down my face. “I’m sure you’re telling me this all out of the kindness of your heart, too, right?” I tried to wipe around my eyes.

I didn’t put on waterproof mascara and already had to do damage control after class. I had every intention of ordering a coat and more waterproof makeup over our lunch break. I was not too fond of raccoon eyes, and makeup was a necessity nowadays. My nightmares had increased lately, and sleep was elusive once again.

I didn’t know if the stress of the merry-go-round my life was in was the issue, or if missing Crew was having a dramatic effect on my life. All I knew was I woke up looking wane and tired every morning, and makeup helped me hide the evidence. I was just thankful that I hadn’t disturbed Zane’s or Paxton’s sleep the last couple of nights.

“Okay. So tell me. If you did swing that way, who you would lick? Answer and I’ll let Des off the hook next week,” I teased, attempting to banish my dark introspections.

Salvatore smirked at me. “I’m confident in my masculinity to admit that Tobias is a sexy beast.”

Renee and I went into another fit of giggles as Sal pulled up in front of the Chinese food restaurant.

“Only because Tobias is probably the only man that could handle your man meat,” Renee said without missing a beat.

Did she just say that?

Sal and I were both shocked into laughter. Although, her logic did make sense. I hadn’t met the guy in person, but all the pictures I found of him online depicted a large man. His height and build rivaled Crew’s, Kyler’s, and Sal’s. Like the other men in the band, he was also insanely hot. If I were single, I would be torn on who I thought was the most alluring.

“What?” Renee spluttered, seeing our shock. “You guys seemed surprised that I *can* be a sexual being. Uncaged can make any girl, teen, and woman purr. And some men, too,” she added. “I’ll have you know that chocolate, hot chocolate, and smutty romance novels are a few of my guilty pleasures when I’m not dancing or doing homework.”

“You’re still a child!” Sal spluttered, slipping into his “Dad” role. “Does your daddy know you read that trash?”

“Yes, Dad Number Two,” Renee said tartly. “I’ll be sixteen soon. Dad’s just thankful no guys are “sniffing” around yet. I know plenty of girls my age that lost their virginity a long time ago. Dad realizes that and prefers my book boyfriends and the undying crush I have on Milo. Also, he has access to my Kindle library. He’s not happy about some of my reading selections, but at least I don’t read straight-up erotica porn. I like a storyline with the sex. Plus, it saved him from having the birds and bees conversation with me.”

She adds the last part with a touch of sadness. Her mother had died of cancer. I kind of understood how hard it could be not to have a mother present. There were a lot of things little girls wanted to turn to their mothers for. Neither of us had that luxury.

My mother chose to be absent from my life. First, because of the crazy amount of hours she had to work to supply Sean's habits and keep a roof over our heads, the latter of which I was at least thankful for, respected, even. Food might have been slim, our electricity and utilities had been shut off a time or two, but I never saw any eviction notices.

“I got ‘the talk’ from Madison,” I informed her. “But I don’t think she gave me all the details,” I tried to joke. “For years, I thought you could get pregnant by giving a guy a blow job.”

“On *that* note,” Sal said with a high-pitched inhale, “I’m going to get that food now.” He got out of the car and headed inside.

Renee began to giggle, and I was relieved to see her sadness dissipate from her eyes. “You should totally embarrass Sal on the set next time and have Zane record it.”

I began to cackle wickedly. “I will have to see if that’s possible.”

The door opened up on Sal's side, and it took me a moment to realize that it wasn't Sal that slid in. This man was big and burly, with a broad barrel chest, and except for the slight paunch in his middle, he was in reasonably good shape.

"Wow, you're a beaut. No wonder my boy is enamored with you." He grinned at me, and I immediately saw the resemblance he had to Kyler and Crew.

Butch Fairchild. He had to be in his late forties, early fifties, and still handsome. Well, he would be if his ice gray eyes weren't so cold and calculating. I could recognize a demon when I saw one, and he was one of them.

I could also smell the cigarette smoke and pungent beer odor emanating from. I recalled Kyler telling me what a mean drunk he could be.

For a moment, I was immobilized by fear, but a slight squeak reminded me that Renee was in the car with me, and I'd be damned if she ended up further traumatized than she already was. She was just recovering from the last hit she took. I didn't want his brand of evil to touch her in any way.

"Ray, run!" I yelled as I grabbed the handle of my car door.

My ponytail was immediately snatched back and my head connected with the center console with a loud thud. I couldn't help but cry out in agony as sharp pain resonated throughout my head like a bell ringing.

Renee whimpered, and I looked over at her and saw the tears flooding her eyes. Her fear trumped my own, and I just wanted to protect her. She needed to go get Sal. She needed to get far away from here.

"Run," I gasped as her image became blurry.

Butch let out a sharp, wicked laugh. "She can't, beauty."

I blinked rapidly and realized my stupid error. I had been so vigilant after my abduction. I was always looking over my shoulder in public. I had made a grave mistake and let my guard down, and now Renee was going to suffer because of it.

Bikers had completely surrounded the car.

How had I not heard the rumble of their engines? Even before my abduction, the sounds of bikes turned my head. I admired them

and dreamed of the next motorcycle I might own.

I tried to struggle in vain. Butch was too big, and I was at a disadvantage at the awkward angle he held me in. When I felt the cold blade of a knife pressed to my throat, all my struggles ceased. I was careless, not stupid.

“Listen here, beauty,” Butch finally growled out, all pretense of friendliness dissipating in a blink of an eye. “You tell Kyler to stop looking for his brother, or I’ll make him come to heel as well. You tell him I know all about those properties he’s working on, and I’d hate for him to lose them all. The insurance company would find it hard to believe that they all went up in flames at the same time.”

My fear and self-preservation were dashed away as I snarled at him. How dare he threaten his son's business? How dare he treat his sons like dogs? “Come to heel,” seriously? Both of his sons were old enough to make their own decisions. He abandoned them for years, and when he returned, he expected them to fall back in line, just like that?

“Crew made his choice,” he said with a smug grin. “He knows he’s the prince to the king, and if he proves himself, the kingdom is his. If Kyler wants to work like a dog to earn his green, he can, but Crew’s always the brighter one. He understands he’ll eventually work less and earn a hell of a lot more than Kyler could ever dream of.”

His words sunk in, and I felt like I was physically punched in the chest. Pain filled my chest. My fears were confirmed. Crew was working for his dad. *Why?*

“Also,” he added as he opened his door, finally releasing his grip on my hair, “Your mama misses you. You need to come to visit her.”

“I don’t have a mother,” I hissed in anger.

I hated this man. I hated how he had hurt Crew and Kyler as boys. I hated how he abandoned Crew when he could barely care for himself. I hated that he had returned and was responsible for Crew leaving me. There were zero redeeming qualities in the devil in front of me.

With the speed that belied his size, his fist recaptured my hair, and the blade was back at my throat, but this time I could feel the sharp sting as the tip pierced my skin. I refused to whimper. I refused

to plead. I had lived in hell for eighteen days, a hell I still revisited several times in my dreams and memories. It would take more than this reprobate to break me. I was unbreakable.

"Maybe," he growled at me, spittle flying from his lips and landing on my cheek. "You misunderstood me. That wasn't a request. It was a *demand*. You will come to visit your mama sooner than later or you'll regret not obeying me. Understood?"

"Where?" I hissed back. "She disconnected her old number, and the last time I saw her, she was more worried about your men than me to leave a number."

A sadistic grin spread across his face as he leaned in and nuzzled my cheek. "Maybe I have the wrong queen by my side. You got fire. I like it."

He licked my cheek, and this time I was unable to stop the whimper that flew from my lips. He seemed to enjoy my fear more as he chuckled.

"She'll call you soon. She'll let you know when and where to meet her." Butch smiled at me and traced the blade of his knife across my cheek.

I cringed but refused to lower my eyes as he watched me. Finally, he unfolded himself from the seat and slammed the door behind him. Renee let out a loud sob, reminding me of her presence. I scrambled out of my seat and climbed into the back. I gathered her in my arms, noticing how badly I was shaking.

I had to push my own emotions away and focus on Renee. She was just returning to the real world after discovering a dead girl that had overdosed. It had shaken her, and I didn't want to be the reason for her setback. I had been careless enough to drop my guard.

Never again. I was done being a victim!

"I'm so sorry," I crooned to her as I rocked her. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Why are you sorry?" she sobbed. "That scum threatened you. He forced Crew back to him. He cut you, Peyton!"

I heard the rumble of the motorbikes starting up and kept one eye on the retreating filth and one eye on Renee. I wanted to flip

Butch off as he looked back over his shoulder and barely refrained from doing so. I was so tired of these pricks trying to prey on me.

“Crew made his choice,” I continued as I forced the words past my lips, words that tasted like ash against my tongue. I wanted to believe Crew had a reason for returning to his father's side. However, no viable reason sprang to mind. Something—or someone—had convinced him that working for his father was the best option for his future.

“Butch can threaten me all he wants. I won’t ‘come to heel.’ I’m not his bitch,” I persisted with a hiss.

My anger had returned in full force. I preferred it to the crippling anxiety that nowadays haunted me when my back was pushed up against the wall. Anger was something I could manage; it took me a little longer to control my anxiety.

“He only nicked me,” I said. “I’ve had worse done to me.” I removed the buff-colored scarf wrapped around my throat and pressed it against my new wound.

It still burned, but the knife was so sharp that it seemed to have only sliced the top layer of my skin off. There wasn’t as much blood on my scarf as I thought there would be.

It was the first time I’d willingly displayed my scars outside of our family unit. I was still horribly conscious of them, even though the electronic collar prong marks were faint circular scars that now resembled snake bikes. The “burn” mark from the collar itself almost blended in entirely with the natural creases of my neck. I knew I would have to gather my courage not to wear clothing pieces to cover them up soon.

I needed to start owning my scars. We all had them. Some of us just carried them on the outside. I needed to stop seeing them as oppressive marks of my captivity and start embracing them as merit badges of a survivor.

I recognized this was a pivotal moment in my recovery. I always loved the symbolism of the mythical phoenix. I loved how they combusted into flames at their death. It had to be painful, right? Yet they rose from the ashes and continued to live again. Some believed this process occurred more than once. Hadn’t I been

burned numerous times? Each time I got back up. It was time I rose from the ashes.

“Is that what you’re so self-conscious of?” Renee asked in a somewhat bewildered tone as she inspected the marks and my new wound.

“It was so ugly when I first returned,” I admitted. “I think in my head I still imagine them just as grisly looking. I know when I look in the mirror now, it’s not terribly noticeable, but I think these scarves and my mock turtle-necks have become a security blanket of sorts.”

The driver's door opens once more, and we both tense for a moment. We both relax when we realize it’s Sal.

“Sorry, they aren’t properly staffed today, and the guys ordered enough food to feed an army,” he chuckled then paused. “Everything, okay?” Sal asked in bewilderment, realizing I’m not in the passenger seat.

He noticed me hastily throwing my scarf back on and detected Renee’s tear-stained face. I straightened and looked out the windows. Observed from this angle, he wouldn’t have seen our visitors arrive. I couldn’t tell him about them. He would never leave my side ever again, and he would definitely feel guilty for letting his guard down.

I really liked Sal, and I truly believed he was terrific at his job. I also knew he would go into hyper-vigilant mode again, and I couldn’t have that. I needed to learn to take care of myself again. I couldn’t have a Shadow for the rest of my life.

“Kyler’s−” Renee began, but I quickly squeezed her hand tightly and cut her off.

“…going to be so jelly that we got Chinese,” I said with a shrug. “We might have to pick it up again on the way home one night this week.”

Sal didn't look like he was buying my explanation as he narrowed his eyes on me. He must have realized I wouldn’t crack, so he looked at Renee. She gave me a look, but I tried to convey to her that I didn’t want him to know what had happened. Hopefully, she’d understand.

“Onward, Jeeves,” I joked trying to break the tension in the vehicle.

“Renee, is there something you’re not telling me?” he used his stern Dad voice again.

Renee looked at me again, sighed, then turned her head away. “No, Dad. I was just having a mini breakdown thinking about my mom. I’m okay now.” She shrugged, staring down at her fingers.

I hated that I made her lie, but I hoped she realized eventually why I did it.

She looked up seconds later. “So. You never confirmed or denied your man-crush on Tobias, Sal.”

I barked out a surprised laugh as Sal quickly turned and started the car. He shook his head, muttering something like “Crazy chicks” under his breath.

“Nah,” I chirped. “It’s totally Grady. You should have seen his reaction when Grady handed him his coffee. I thought he was going to jizz right there.”

“Peyton Delaney!” Sal barked. “Does your Grandpa know you talk like that?”

I let out a dramatic sigh, trying to dispel the unease in my chest. I needed to entertain myself with something other than my dark thoughts. I was great at deflecting and processing stuff at my own rate. Right now, I needed the distraction.

“Sal, it’s not like he’ll reprimand me for it.” For a moment, I embraced the belligerent teen role. “It’s not like he raised me. I know you’re not a dumb man. I’m sure you did your research. My sperm donor didn’t verify if my mother terminated me or not. My grandpa only just found out about me. And the man that I thought was my father despised my very existence and let me know it on a daily basis.

“I didn’t know why. Now that I’m aware of my true parentage, I understand why Sean either pretended like I didn’t exist or used me to take out his frustrations on. I was his daily reminder. I was his brother's image, and he could not knock my mom up with his perfect donation. It was just further proof of all his inadequacies. He was a failure at life, and by public standards, his brother was the golden child. Now stop deflecting and admit it’s Grady. It is! Isn’t it?” I needled him.

He seemed momentarily angry on my behalf over my words but then seemed to understand I didn't want to discuss the previous subject further.

"If, *if*," he enunciated, "I was into men, yeah, Grady would be my choice. He's the most talented member of the band. Not that it's general knowledge, but he actually formed their band. He knows and proficiently plays all the instruments. Plus, the songs I enjoy the most so happen to be written by him."

I leaned back and laughed, crossing my arms over my chest. "I can see that. I did my own research, too. I have to admit I like the fact that I respect Grady the most. He may be a manwhore like the others, but it's not public knowledge. He's smarter about his private life."

"They *were* manwhores," Renee chimed in. "Rumor has it that some woman has been seen with them. Supposedly, they aren't taking groupies back to the bus or their rooms. And they seem super protective of her identity."

"Hmm," I pondered aloud. "I wonder if it's the same woman Laken and Ayden was talking about. Apparently, Clementine broke into Laken and Ayden's room and told their girlfriend that they invited her back. It pissed them off, but they had no proof that someone hadn't set Clementine up. From their past, I wouldn't think they would care unless this woman does mean something to them."

I didn't know if our discussion violated my NDA, but I didn't think it did. Besides, it wasn't like Renee or Sal would tell anyone about our conversation.

Sal snorted from the front seat, and I looked at him with a questioning look.

"What's that snort mean?"

"Nothing," he quickly answered.

I had a feeling he was going to shoot down my idea of one woman being able to capture and hold the attention of two men. He saw my relationship with the guys, and I'm sure he had his doubts about us. Hell, he had proof, just by Crew's defection alone. However, I was starting to have faith in the others. Even if it crashed and burned or ran its course, I knew what we felt for each other right now was real. That was enough for me.

Relationships started and ended every day for regular couples. Because we were unconventional, though, it didn't doom us to failure.

"Salvatore," I said in my best stern voice as we pulled up to the school. "Speak freely. I won't be hurt by your opinion or take it personally. I would hope you saw me more than just your charge or client by now."

He shook his head. "Look, Peyton, I feel like you are more than my client, so I'll be real with you. The situation you have with your guys isn't…"

"Normal," Renee blurted out.

I gave her an incredulous look. I never thought she doubted us. I thought she was one of our greatest supporters.

"However, Sal," she continued with a smug grin, "I suggest you look at polyamorous or polyandry relationships. People make it work every day. Did you know that polyandry is practiced in other cultures? Just because it's not largely recognized here doesn't mean it can't or won't work. We could fall in love more than once in our lifetime. Why not at the same time?"

"It's not that," Sal explained with a wary look my way as he parked the car. "I see how you guys are, and I see the love you have for each other. I don't doubt it may work. However…" he seemed momentarily lost for words.

"Laken and Ayden are famous," I surmised. "You think they couldn't be interested in the same woman because they constantly have women throwing themselves at them. That isn't fair."

"It's not fair, but it's true," Renee said with a nonchalant shrug as we walked up to the school.

I mock-gasped at her. "Are you Team Sal now? I thought you were Team Peyton!"

"I'm Switzerland." She laughed with a shake of her head as we entered the school.

"You have to pick a team," I insisted.

"I'm team Peyton," Paxton crowed moments before he threw his arm over my shoulders.

I had been so into our conversation I hadn't realized we made it just in time for lunch. The halls were packed. Suddenly, my earlier

resolve seemed shaken. It was easier to make pacts to yourself when faced with just one adversary.

It was harder to maintain that fortitude when I noticed Leah's death glare and her determination to get to me. Plus, I was immediately faced with Crew leaning against his locker with Jana draped all over him. He wasn't touching her, but he wasn't making a move to get away from her either.

Both of them seemed to notice my attention at once and looked my way. Crew's face was impassive, while Jana looked like the cat that ate the canary. Without breaking eye contact, she weaved her hands through his hair and yanked his face down to hers.

I quickly turned my head away. I refused to witness a part of my world shattering.

Was it possible to hear your heart shatter? I was pretty sure mine just did. I never experienced actual heartbreak until that moment. The best way I could explain it was feeling like being pushed over the edge from a great height, then free-falling with no harness to catch you. Emotions you rarely experienced together crashed into you at once, leaving you breathless, and the tears you were unaware were falling threatened to overflow like a waterfall.

I had pushed my feelings back for too long. I assumed I could handle all the scenarios I had concocted in my head. I thought finding out about Golden and Madison was devastating, something which I thought now would prepare me for this feeling, make it easier to process.

The significant difference between the heartbreaks was Golden had been immediately repentant and hadn't been an active participant. However, not only had he ignored me, Crew appeared to be an active participant with the girl who shoved me into a dark closet, violated me, and caused a massive panic attack. His betrayal was on multiple levels, coming out of nowhere.

I thought I was prepared. I thought I was ready. I wasn't.

Golden must have seen my look of heartbreak. He was across the hallway before I could stop him.

He none-to-gently pulled Crew away from Jana, then faced Crew. "How *could* you?" he snarled, grabbing Crew by the lapels of

his jacket and slamming him against the wall. “How can you leave Peyton for that whore? Did you forget what she did to you?”

With nearly every word he spoke, he punctuated each with a shove to Crew against the wall. Crew continued to look at him impassively.

Jana crossed her arms over her chest and smiled at me. “I told you he would return to me.”

I felt Paxton pull me into an embrace as Sal and Zane attempted to pull Golden away. We were drawing too much attention. There was now a circle of people around us and some immature assholes were even beginning to chant: *“Fight! Fight!”*

“I’m not with her,” Crew said calmly, still not attempting to break Golden’s hold or defend himself in any way. It didn’t even register that Crew could easily pull away from Golden.

Crew looked over at me, and something akin to self-loathing and determination sparkled in his eyes. It was all so damn confusing! I felt a panic attack begin to set in. It was all too much. First, I’d been attacked by his dad and now I had to deal with this betrayal.

“Crew−” Jana began.

“Shut up,” he snarled cutting her off. “You know the deal,” he hissed.

“What deal? Why are you letting her touch you then?” Golden scoffed, now in Sal’s and Zane’s hold. “You know what happened the last time you played this game. You were one of the first ones to tell me how much I messed up with Peyton, and now you’re doing it?”

Teachers were drawing closer and demanding that people move away. Bodies pressed against me as claustrophobia threatened to choke me. Then the fire alarms began to blare overhead and the lights began to flicker on and off. It was too much. My senses were on overload. I felt my vision blur and my chest ached as the panic attack was triggered once more.

“Get me out of here,” I gasped before the world turned dark.

28

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Epidemic

I was disorientated and groggy when I came-to. It took me a moment to realize I was lying in my bed on a man's chest, and someone else spooned me from behind. When I went to shift my leg, I realized someone else was lying on both legs. For a moment, I felt my throat closing in a panic until I felt gentle fingers run through my hair, dragging them over my scalp.

I turned startled eyes on Golden, and he gave me a gentle smile.

"What happened?" I rasped through my thick throat.

"You had a panic attack and passed out," Kyler said from a chair in the corner of my room.

I started for a moment. I hadn't even seen Kyler there. And why was I in my room? My curtains were drawn, so I didn't even know what time it was.

I gathered my thoughts and surroundings and realized it was Paxton who was sleeping soundly on my legs, his head cradled on my stomach. Zane shifted in front of me to place a hand on my cheek, and Golden continued his amazing caresses through my hair and over my scalp.

I recalled now why I had my panic attack. I stiffened again. Crew broke my heart. He decided to leave me for money, his father, and that bitch, Jana. After Jana did him dirty, I never thought he would ever go back to her.

I noticed that my eyes felt puffy, like I had been crying. There was an emptiness in my chest that made me wonder if, in my panic-induced state, I had completely lost it back at school. I just prayed Jana and Crew hadn't witnessed it. I didn't want to give Jana the satisfaction of seeing my tears, and Crew didn't deserve them.

"I think it's been a long few days," I said aloud, looking for an explanation. "I think my emotions were already stretched thin."

I felt Paxton stir and noticed he was awake now. He turned and placed a gentle kiss on my stomach before laying his head back down. He gently traced circular patterns on my stomach, and I felt my nerves quiver with how sensitive my skin was there.

"If you need to take a few steps back, no one will blame you," Kyler gruffly said as he leaned forward in the chair, bracing his forearms across his knees. "I know you want to be in that music video, and I'm aware Anya is still pushing you. Maybe you shouldn't have so much on your plate right now. However, I know it's more than that. I know Crew is hurting you. You need to talk about it, Peyton."

"I'm not quitting the video," I said softly. "I'm also not taking on more than what I've done in the past. I used to have dance, school, competitions, and a job. I'm not carrying a job any longer. And what is there to talk about?" I tried to clear my throat of the thick heaviness in it. "He's running for your dad and back with Jana. It was bound to happen with one of you, if not all of you," I said with a touch of bitterness.

"Hey," Golden crossly stated. "That's not fair. Most of us have already made it clear we're with *you* for the long haul. *You* are the one we want. Sure, seeing Crew with that…bitch pissed me off. But once I cooled off, I got to thinkin': there's more to the story than we know. I honestly don't think Crew could hurt you like that. So, yeah, Crew may be hanging around Jana, but they're not back together."

"I also think there's more to the story than we know," Paxton softly chimed in "Crew may be hanging around Jana, but they're not back together."

"I saw them," I hissed as Zane handed me a glass of water.

"You heard Jana tell you they were back together, but I know Crew wants nothing to do with her," Paxton explained. "You should have seen how panicked he was when he saw you collapse. That's not a reaction from a man that doesn't have feelings for you," he insisted. "We're all in one class or another with him. I've been watching him and… something's going on. Something he doesn't want to tell us about. Yet."

I unconsciously rubbed the cut over my throat. "Crew's been ghosting us all. He's texted me back once since he decided to pull

this disappearing act. Maybe he isn't with Jana, but he's definitely back with Butch. I know Crew used to be her muscle when she did her drops. He's been lured back into that life."

"Not by choice," Zane said with conviction. "I agree with Paxton. Crew wouldn't return to that life for the money. Why would he need it? We have schools offering us partial if not full scholarships. The house they live in doesn't have a mortgage, and he makes enough money working for Kyler to keep money in his pocket for everything else.

"He's putting *himself* in danger," I huffed. "That's not an excuse to turn his back on us and hang out with the girl that assaulted me."

"He knows he doesn't carry the weight alone," Kyler agreed as he took a few steps towards the bed and sat on the edge of it. "He refuses to even talk to me, and he hasn't shown up to the job site either."

I rubbed weary hands over my swollen eyes. I felt nasty and desperately needed a shower. And I was tired. So tired. I didn't want to grasp onto any hope the guys were trying to feed me.

It still hurt. Crew had let me lean on him when I needed him. Why wouldn't he lean on me, even if I wasn't as "strong" as him? He could at least feed me the illusion so I didn't feel like he was there to catch me, when all along he didn't trust me to catch *him.*

Don't get me wrong. I knew I was strong. I knew I was a survivor. I just didn't seem to carry it as well as he did.

"About that…" I took a deep inhale, knowing they weren't going to like what I had to say. "I think I know why Crew won't talk to you. Butch paid me a visit today." I ran my fingers over the tender spot on my neck. "He wants you to stop calling Crew, Kyler. He made it sound like if you didn't, he'd set all the houses, the ones you're working on, on fire."

Just as I expected, it was like an explosion had gone off. Kyler was up and pacing. "What do you mean Butch visited you?" he ground out.

"When did he have the opportunity to do that?" Golden inquired simultaneously.

"Where the hell was Sal?" Paxton fumed.

“Sal ran into the restaurant to get our lunch,” I explained and quickly snatched Paxton's arm before he could fly upstairs. “I didn’t tell him, and he did nothing wrong. The car was fifty feet from the restaurant, and it was busy in there. He never saw Butch and his men roll-up. Even if he had, he was grossly outnumbered. I’m glad he hadn’t intervened. He could have been hurt. Butch is a sick bastard. Right now, he’s content having Crew by his side, but I don’t underestimate how sadistic he could be. I don’t want him going after Kyler next. He acts like he owns you guys.” I looked at Kyler. “He thinks he can control me by default. He’s insisting that I visit my mother.”

“How did you get this, Peyton?” Zane inquired as he gently ran his finger across my cut.

I closed my eyes and sighed. My guys were overprotective. I didn’t want them reacting out of anger. I could see Golden and Kyler going on a man-hunt, not caring that they were outnumbered and unprepared.

The overhead light flipped on, and I blink at its brightness as Golden gently tilted my head back.

“Mother fu−” Kyler began to yell as he took a step closer.

The door pushed open then, and Lochlann came striding in. “What’s going on?” he inquired. “Love, are you okay?”

“Butch cornered her today and threatened her with a blade,” Golden seethed before he rolled off the bed. “He cut her!” He was up and out of the room before I realized his intentions.

“Golden, no!” I yelled, attempting to stop him.

I had seen the darkness enter his eyes, and I knew he was on the warpath. My legs were weak when I finally stood, but I still stumbled towards him. I reached the top of the steps when I heard the front door slam.

“Pey!” Clay cried excitedly as his eyes lit upon me.

I knew I’d have to multi-task. Clay would scream bloody murder if I didn’t pay any attention to him. However, I couldn’t allow Golden to fly off in the state of mind he was in. I scooped Clay up and ran off after Golden.

But I was too late. He was peeling away right as my foot hit the front porch. I went to reach for my phone to call him but realized I

didn't have it on me.

"Everything okay?" Renee inquired as she stepped outside onto the porch.

"I told Golden about Butch," I said, my breath hitched with worry.

Renee looked confused, and I realized she had bought into the persona Golden had erected. He was outgoing, flirty, and laid back. On the flip side, though, he had a dark side. I still didn't know why he hid that side, but I knew it existed. I'd seen it lurking under the surface of the image he generally projected.

"I'll go find him." Kyler came running out of the door next, his phone up to his ear.

He ran down the steps but quickly ran back up and placed a gentle kiss on my knick, then my lips. "We'll talk some more when I get back," he promised before leaping off the steps.

I hadn't even realized he was on his bike until it roared to life. In a plume of dust, he followed Golden's exit.

"Everything okay?" Des came out running from the garage apartment. His gun was clearly still attached to his hip.

That man never rested. He was always on. He was much better than the last guy, but I wished he would loosen up just a little sometimes.

"Yeah," I croaked as Lochlann stepped behind me and placed his arm around my waist.

"Kyler will find him before he does anything stupid," Lochlann murmured in my ear as I saw a pizza delivery driver come up the drive. "We're good here, Desmond. The boys wanted to take care of something," he said vaguely. "I ordered extra pizzas, if you guys wanna join us."

Desmond didn't look like he believed us, but he nodded. "We're good. Thanks, though. I put some beef stew in the crockpot earlier. You guys don't have to worry about us all the time, you know."

"We tend to order or make extra all the time," Lochlann said with a shrug.

"Well, thanks again." Des looked at me, then waited to watch the pizza delivery guy exit his vehicle with a stack of boxes. Des stayed

until the delivery guy was finally back in his vehicle and going.

My stomach loudly started protesting as I caught a whiff of pizza. I realized then that I hadn't eaten for some time and the sun was setting. "What time is it?" I must have been blacked out for hours.

"It's nearly six," Lochlann answered.

"Holy crap," I muttered as I rubbed my head, feeling a headache coming on. "Did anyone get my schoolwork? Did anyone call Anya?"

Paxton and Zane had joined Lochlann, Renee, and me on the porch. My mind was finally slowing down enough to realize Renee was here after school and not at dance.

"What am I missing?" I inquired, looking around at everyone.

Everyone looked grim.

I really didn't know how much more I could take right now. I already felt emotionally fraught with today's events. What more would be thrust upon me? I really didn't know how much more I could handle.

My earlier resolve seemed like a pipe dream right now. I was proud of how I had handled Butch and his threats, but now I wasn't sure if it was just false bravado in the heat of the moment. I hated being a shadow of myself, but I was at a sudden loss at gaining back control.

"We'll talk during dinner. You must be starving by now." Lochlann led me into the house and to the kitchen.

"The fire alarms," I blurted out as I recalled hearing them before I'd blacked out.

"We had to evacuate the school," Lochlann explained. "Hey, Mai?" Lochlann called down the hallway. "Dinner's here! Did you find a movie you wanted to watch?"

"Yes." Maisie came skipping down the hall. "Hey Peyton, is your head feeling better?" She smiled up at me.

I realized the guys must have told her I had a headache when she found out I was in my room. Golden or Paxton would have picked her up from Grandpa's almost two hours ago. By the time I came home, she had finished any homework she may have had and was now anticipating dinner.

I had promised her I'd tell her all about my visit to the city. Until recently, she danced for fun. Within the last few weeks, though, she was taking it more seriously. She had asked to increase her practice times from once a week to three. We had talked to Anya, and she believed she was ready for it, and next week, she would be starting her new class schedule.

Grandpa also had all the girls starting next week. Gideon and Raphael showed no interest in it, so they both decided on swimming after discussing it with them. Their lessons would begin next week as well.

"Much better, thank you." I feigned a smile as I pulled out paper plates.

"Renee, are you coming to watch Trolls with me?" Maisie hopefully asked as Lochlann placed a slice of bacon and pepperoni pizza on her plate.

"Not tonight, Mai," Paxton gently stated. "We're already allowing you to watch a movie while you eat."

"Only because you don't want me listening to 'adult talk,'" Maisie said with an eye roll.

"Girl," Paxton gently reprimanded her as he placed some salad on her plate.

"Boy," Maisie replied sassily. "I'm not as stupid as you think I am."

The urge to laugh was there, but her attitude as of late was getting out of hand. There was a fine line between being disrespectful and being spirited. Lately, it wasn't polite, and I knew laughing would only encourage the behavior.

"Number one, don't roll your eyes at us," Paxton stated sternly. "Number two, no one believes nor called you stupid. Number three, I think you owe us an apology."

Maisie's eyes narrowed, and she mutinously stared at Paxton.

"Maisie," Lochlann firmly said. "Apologize now, or you can sit in the other room without television and go straight to bed afterward."

Maisie deflated. "Sorry. I just don't think it's fair. I want to sit in here and talk, too."

"I already explained this to you," Lochlann stated tenderly. "There's just some discussions you don't need to be privy to. We

compromised. We're giving you a special treat to watch a movie while you eat. When we're done eating, we will come and watch the film with you and maybe bring some snacks. Then, if you want to tell us more about your day or tell us anything, we'll be all ears."

"Okay." Maisie sighed heavily.

I really loved watching how the guys were with the children. They shared the burden equally and were on the same page more often than not. If they disagreed with something, they pulled each other aside and discussed the situation in depth until a resolution was reached.

"I picked up more of that raspberry sherbet the other day," Paxton added. "If you eat all your pizza and salad, we can have that."

"Okay!" Maisie's spirits lifted as she skipped back down the hallway.

Paxton hated being the "bad guy," but he did it with such ease. He understood how important it was to stand firm with spirited Maisie, or she'd be walking all over us. It was just another testament to what an amazing guy he was. I found myself standing on my tiptoes and brushing my lips across his cheek. He looked surprised but gave me a warm smile in return.

"Why does he get a kiss?" Lochlann teased.

I rolled my eyes and laughed. The tension was still building in me, but it was a nice reprieve to have them as a distraction.

"He hates being the *bad* guy," Zane spoke around a mouthful of pizza with a wry grin.

"And I don't?" Lochlann protested.

"No, it's not that." I shook my head, grabbing slices of pineapple pizza, a plain cheese, and a piece of mushrooms and sausage. "You just slip into the bad guy role easier."

Lochlann turned around and swatted me on the butt. "I'll show you Bad Guy," he mocked growled. He hastily pulled his hand back and then blinked in shock. His eyes shot towards Renee, and I realized he forgot about her presence.

She shook her head and laughed. "I know. Anyone with eyes sees it. Dad and I had an in-depth discussion about it. He doesn't see the issue with it, especially if Grandpa Delaney doesn't care."

I could see that her statement made Lochlann slightly uneasy, so I tried to relieve the tension the best way I knew how. “Was that before or after the discussion about your erotica porn?”

Renee gasped in mock outrage. “I told you it was smut, not erotica porn. I like my books to have a storyline. The desperate housewife that bangs the pool-boy five minutes after she meets him holds no appeal to me.”

I could see that she had shocked the guys because all their mouths were hanging wide open.

“Don’t judge me.” Renee rolled her eyes. “You guys,” she pointed at Lochlann, Zane, and Golden, “act like you didn’t start masturbating to Playboy when you were, like, twelve. And,” she continued, “Paxton, you lost your virginity at fourteen, Zane at, what, fifteen? I like reading romance books, so what if they have sex in them? I still have my V-card, at least.”

“How do you know that?” Zane spluttered, clearly embarrassed.

I shuddered, remembering precisely who he lost it to.

I took Clay to his booster seat, allowing Renee to handle the guys. I enjoyed seeing her coming out of her shell. If she talked to them about her sex-life, her books, and taking them to task, it further proved how comfortable she was around us.

I began tearing off small pieces of cheese pizza for Clay as Renee sassily replied back.

“Puhlease…” Renee retorted, taking a seat across the table from me. “You lost it to Leah. Sorry,” she grimaced at me, “She and Bailey love to one-up each other, and Bailey has a huge mouth. Everyone has loose lips around the introvert with no friends.”

“You have friends now,” I chimed in, content to watch the rest of this discussion unfold.

“I know.” Renee grinned widely before turning back to Zane. “This is a small town. Everyone talks, especially after Bailey flashed her birth control pills to us in the locker room and told us that her mom was more proactive than her aunt.”

“I didn’t hook up with any girls in town,” Paxton grumbled as he took the seat beside me. He shot me an apologetic look, but I merely smiled and shook my head.

They had pasts. I got over it.

“No, but again, people talk. You lost your virginity to one of Kayley's cousins on a dare. A dare. Really? Come on, dude.” Renee took a large mouthful of her pizza.

“Who are you and what have you done to my sweet innocent Ray?” Paxton asked, looking genuinely horrified.

Renee shrugged and chewed thoughtfully. “I think finding Dove in the bathroom was a wake-up call,” she answered truthfully. “She’s only a year older than me. So young and in a blink of an eye, she’s gone. She seemed reasonably popular. She was smart and athletic. People still leave her notes on her locker door. They held a candlelight vigil in front of her house. I could see it from my home. People are still leaving candles, stuffed animals, pictures, and letters along her parent's fence. She will be remembered for years to come.

“So, it made me think. No one notices me unless I’m on stage. If − knock on wood− I died tomorrow, very few people would remember me. I want to be remembered. Losing my mom at such a young age changed me. I was outgoing and had tons of friends before she got sick. When she died, none of them understood what I was going through, so I pushed them away. I withdrew into myself. Eventually, they stopped trying. I don’t blame them, but I’m determined that I can’t live like that anymore. You only get one life, and we have to make the most of it. If I can’t be open and honest to the ones who mean the most to me, then I’m wasting the life I was given. This is who I am, and I’m not going to be ashamed of it anymore. I’m done worrying about what people will think.”

She took a deep breath and looked at each of us. “If you care about me, then you’ll accept me for who I am. If you can’t accept me for who I am, were you really my friend, to begin with?”

Her truths were hitting me hard. She had taken a tragedy and allowed it to transform her in a positive way. It showed terrific maturity and growth, and I admired her for it.

“You can do all that and remain a virgin?” Paxton finally blurted out.

I blinked at Paxton in shock as Zane began to laugh and shake his head. Even Lochlann covered a smile behind his hand.

“Really, dude?” Renee started giggling. “I opened up to you, and you’re worried about me keeping my V-card.”

“As your big brother, it’s my job,” Paxton insisted mutinously.

I started to laugh. Paxton’s logic made no sense, yet made perfect sense when it came to him. He had already taken her under his wing from the beginning; it was no surprise that her revelation didn’t affect him as it did us.

“Last time I checked, I was an only child,” Renee replied tartly.

“Not anymore,” Paxton defiantly stated. “Test me. Let me see you talking to a boy that I disapprove of.”

“You can’t watch me all the time,” Renee goaded him back.

“Okay, you two,” I teased. “Can we talk about why Renee is here and why no one’s given me my makeup work for the day?” I looked over at the stack of yesterday's school assignments Zane and I found on the breakfast bar last night. We already planned to attack it after dinner tonight. The teachers had been understanding, even allowing us to complete it by this Friday.

Zane and Paxton looked over at Lochlann, deferring to him. I refrained from rubbing my head; instead, I placed more food in front of Clay.

“Another student was found dead under the bleachers today. It appeared like he had overdosed as well,” Lochlann quietly stated. “The DEA believes it’s part of an epidemic. Drug use is common among teens, but after Dove and this student today, they decided to step in. They were already investigating twelve deaths in this town and the surrounding cities. That’s why the DEA stepped in. They don’t think it was a coincidence. They believe the tainted drugs are coming from the same supplier.”

“Butch,” I stated without hesitation. “Who died?”

“Thomas Wade,” Lochlann replied.

I looked over at Zane and saw the sadness in his eyes. How had I not seen it earlier? Thomas Wade was a football player. I didn’t care for him, he rubbed me the wrong way, but he was a decent athlete and a good student. As captain of the football team, Zane had taken his responsibility seriously. He made sure his “guys” stayed on top of their grades and was there for them on and off the field. Just last weekend, he ran out to pick up one of his guys at a

party. One of the players had drank too much and didn't want to drive home. They knew they could count on Zane to be there for them, so he had picked him up and made sure he was okay.

Zane personally didn't care for Thomas, but he was still invested in him. Thomas might have been too pushy and overly flirtatious towards me, but he never struck me as someone to do drugs. I saw him drink, but never once did I witness any football players do any drugs. I saw plenty of people smoking weed at the last party I attended, but the athletes seemed to avoid it. Why would he pass on weed but go straight to the hard stuff? It made no sense.

I stood up and sat in Zane's lap. I didn't have the words to comfort him while my mind was sent into a whirlwind, but I could physically give him comfort. I ran my fingers through his hair and felt relieved when he relaxed under my touch.

"That doesn't make any sense," I voiced my thoughts aloud. "Two reasonably bright athletes overdose less than a week apart? What types of drugs were they taking?"

Lochlann shrugged. "The agents wouldn't tell us, but before they evacuated the school, I saw the dogs, so I suspect they have their suspicions. I tried to do my own investigation, and I was able to discover four other victims who were college and high school students. They all seemed active in their school one way or another. All their families and friends seemed shocked because they all seemed 'clean.'"

"They're canceling classes for the rest of the week, and they may cancel the homecoming dance." He grimaced. "Grief counselors will be at the school, and the DEA will be contacting students individually and questioning them. I'm going in tomorrow, so I'll let you guys know when they have you scheduled to come in."

"Anya decided to cancel tonight's lessons," Renee said, "but wants to see us back tomorrow afternoon."

"I'm going to go visit Thomas' parents tomorrow," Zane stated quietly. "I didn't care too much for the guy, but his parents are good people. They came out to help in the call center for you," he informed me.

I felt tears burn the back of my eyes. My heart was breaking for Thomas' parents. I knew when Claire disappeared, and then me,

it acted as a wake-up call for some parents. I realized some of them held their children closer, recognizing it hit too close to home.

“I’ll go with you if you want,” I whispered around the thick ball in the back of my throat.

Zane leaned forward and kissed the back of my head. “Thank you, beautiful, but I’m not going alone. A lot of the guys on the team are going over together. Thomas’ dad had a list of outside chores he wanted to be done sometime this week, so we’re going to knock it out for them. I know some of the team’s moms are collecting gift cards and making food to take over to them as well.”

“When did you find all this out?” I asked as tears fell down my cheeks.

Suddenly my woes seemed to pale in comparison to what Thomas’ and Dove’s families were going through. These were teens that should have had a long life ahead of them, and suddenly they didn’t. My heart had been broken, but their hearts were ripped wide open with the loss of their children.

“Find out?” Paxton scoffed as he came over to rub my back. “He planned it all.”

I looked at Zane in shock, and he seemed embarrassed by my awe and Paxton’s praise.

“It was just a few phone calls,” Zane explained. “I like the Wades. His dad was there for me when I was about to have a breakdown, and Michael, Thomas’ older brother, helped me a lot as a brand-new freshman on the team.”

I wanted to delve more into his statement about his breakdown but knew now wasn’t the time or place. Like always, he was stepping up when he was needed and making it look effortless. I also knew he wouldn’t want any credit once everything was said and done.

“Pey!” Clay began to wail at the top of his lungs.

Lochlann stood up and clapped Zane’s shoulder as he passed. He grabbed Clay, but the little guy wasn’t having it. He tried to lunge towards me as Lochlann whispered words of comfort to him.

“I think out of all your harem, Zane’s my favorite,” Renee casually stated as she took a bite of her salad. “He really is the complete package. Sweet, smart, thoughtful, and the boy can dance.

You should have seen him earlier. He's on the phone up here, then running downstairs to check on you, then up here again. He's a real keeper. Sorry, Mr. Isaacs," she added, "I haven't seen you in action yet. Although, you were really helpful in my recovery."

I laughed amidst my tears. "I don't have a harem," I choked out.

"You do. It's called a *reverse harem*. I have a few books you can borrow." Renee stood and got another piece of pizza.

"Hey," Paxton cried out in mock indignation. "I'm sweet, caring, thoughtful, and I can dance."

Renee turned and made a weird dance move. "This isn't dancing. I've seen your moves. Stick to photography. That's your niche."

Clay continued to cry for me, and I stood to take him from Lochlann as I laughed at Renee's antics. I was so happy she was here with us tonight. She was helping me stay out of my head with her quirky sense of humor.

"No kye." Clay patted my face with one of his hands and my back with the other.

Sometimes his baby mumbles were unrecognizable. Other times, his meaning came across loud and clear.

I cuddled him close. "Oh, sweet boy. I'll try not to cry," I rocked him.

This little boy had my heart hook, line, and sinker. I hated to imagine how I would feel when I finally landed somewhere after graduation. I had to pursue my career, but I knew my heart would break not seeing him as often as I did now.

"Must be taking notes from Zane," Renee said saucily as she sat back down.

I laughed once more as Paxton groaned loudly. "I've changed more of Clay's diapers, given him more baths, and took him to daycare more times than Zane ever has. If he's learning from anyone, it's me."

Zane and Lochlann laughed at Paxton's ire. It was entirely too easy to push his buttons, and Renee jammed at them with wild, merciless glee.

"He doth protest too much." Renee sniffed.

Paxton let out another loud growl of frustration.

“Wanna eat some more?” I asked Clay as I sat back down with him. I took a bite of my pizza before offering it to him.

We hadn’t eaten enough yet, and I couldn’t allow my emotions to affect my physical recovery. Gaining weight was a part of that.

Zane’s phone went off, and he looked down at it. “I’ll be right back. It’s one of the guys,” he explained before standing up and making his way towards the front playroom.

Maisie came into the kitchen. “Are you guys done eating yet?”

Lochlann looked at all of us, and we nodded in unison. “We can take the rest of the pizza into the great room and finish it in there.”

We all stood and began gathering things. I hoped this animated movie kept me distracted enough from my worries about Golden and Kyler. And my profound sadness for Thomas’ family and Dove’s.

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No Idle Threats

Since my panic-induced nap had been such a long one, I didn't seem as tired as I should have been. Lochlann, Zane, Paxton, Renee, and I had put the children to bed and then went back into the great room to watch a movie.

Renee decided to spend the night since she didn't want to be alone. Her dad didn't return from work until late, and she didn't want to be by herself. Grandpa had given him a chance to be one of his foremen, and since he was still getting the hang of it, he was the first one there and the last to leave.

It was a lot more money, and he could quit one of his jobs, but until he was acclimated to the new role, he still worked crazy-long hours some days. He offered to come home once he found out what had happened, but Renee insisted that he stay at work. She was learning to cope with her experience and didn't want to lean on her father constantly.

As each hour ticked by, my anxiety began to rise. I started to get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. When the clock hit midnight, I finally stood.

"I can't take this anymore," I stated with a stubborn shake of my head. "Kyler and Golden aren't texting any of us back, and something doesn't feel right."

"I don't know what else to do." Lochlann deeply sighed as he leaned forward and delved his fingers through the longer locks on the top of his head. "They aren't picking up their phones, and if they went hunting Crew down… he could be anywhere. Butch has several… dens."

I didn't think any of us were paying attention to the action movie that was playing on the television. Even Renee had been gnawing on her thumbnail for the last hour or so. I realized this was a

nervous habit for her. I had been twisting my ring, and Paxton had been incessantly clicking his tongue ring.

Paxton jumped up. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of this earlier,” he cursed before rushing out of the room.

He came running back into the room. “Who’s coming with me?” he inquired, holding up his phone. “I forgot that Golden put a tracker app on my phone when I flew off the rails after Mam and Da died. He would always show up at the most random times and places. He was continually rescuing me, and finally, I realized it couldn’t always be coincidental. When I was sober enough, I realized he hid it in a file I never opened. So as payback, I put it on his phone, too. Then I started to show up to places he didn’t expect. He wasn’t amused. We promised never to use it again, only as an emergency. I think this constitutes an emergency.”

“Let me grab a jacket, and I’ll text Sal,” I stated as I jumped up.

I didn’t want to wake him, but I knew he would be upset if I left the property without him. The uneasiness in my stomach also told me we should probably have someone more experienced with the people we might encounter on our hunt.

Lochlann and Zane jumped up as well and looked over at Renee. She gave us a wane smile and nods. “Find the guys. I’ll stay with the kids.”

I felt guilty for forgetting about that detail. “Are you sure?” I asked.

She nodded emphatically. “Of course. Go!”

This was just another reason why I loved this girl. She didn’t hesitate to help us out.

“Thanks, hon.” I impulsively hugged her before running to my room.

I immediately threw on a Henley, one of my hoodies, and slipped on a pair of yoga pants over my sleep shorts. My hands were shaking and my belly was twisted in knots. Something was off. I felt it deep in my bones.

On my way back upstairs, I tried to call Sal, but it went straight to voicemail. I tried Des next.

“Hello?” he said with a groggy voice after the second ring.

“I’m sorry to call you so late,” I rushed out immediately. “But Golden and Kyler left hours ago, and we’re going to attempt to find them.”

“Where to?” he asked in a sleep-laden voice.

I heard shuffling in the background and noticed Zane, Paxton, and Lochlann waiting by the front door. They had changed into warmer clothing as well.

“Paxton has the location on the phone?” I said with a slight question in my voice as I looked at Paxton.

He nodded in confirmation.

“Okay,” Des said with zero disgruntlement. “How far?”

I wasn’t so sure I would feel so cooperative if someone woke me up after midnight. Salvatore and Desmond already kept weird hours because of my schedule.

“How far?” I asked Paxton.

“Seventeen miles,” he said as he peered down at his phone.

“I heard,” Desmond informed me as I heard a door open over the phone. “Hey−” his voice cut off in puzzlement. “Salvatore isn’t here. Did he tell you he had to leave?”

I was just as bewildered. I shook my head before I realized he couldn't see me. “No, I tried calling him first and it went straight to voicemail.” Further unease filled me. “I can text his sister.”

“Okay, see you in a minute.” Des sounded slightly concerned before hanging up on his end.

I knew it was late to text Nina, but I also knew the younger ones still got up several times at night. I was glad Sal insisted that I have his sister's number. I pulled out my phone.

Me: Hey, Ni, I was wondering if you heard from your brother?

I sent it and opened the front door. “Sal’s not there,” I informed the guys as we stepped onto the porch.

The wind was howling, and I immediately shuddered as it cut through my clothing so effortlessly. It further reminded me of the need for a new coat. I wish we would have heated the Denali as we were getting ready so it could have been somewhat warm when we climbed in.

I almost smiled when I noticed the garage door open. The Denali was purring away. If my mind weren't so crowded with worry and concern, I would have. I looked over at Lochlann, and he nodded.

"The temperature dropped into the thirties," he immediately explained.

I reached out and grabbed his hand. He squeezed it before he opened up the passenger door and guided me in.

"What's the address?" Desmond said without preamble as he climbed into the back.

Paxton immediately rattled off the address, and Lochlann looked over at him. "Repeat that?" he asked with a steady voice.

Paxton did so. He looked entirely puzzled by their interest. Admittedly, so was I.

"Wait. Isn't that one of Kyler's properties?" Zane leaned forward in his seat.

Lochlann gave a brief nod. "It is."

By the grim set of his jaw, I had a feeling he felt the unease that I had been feeling for the last hour or so.

"Would they be working late?" Paxton said hopefully inquired.

I was glad Paxton was optimistic, but the guys would have called us. Kyler and I already had this discussion. He understood how much I would worry if I didn't hear from him. His phone had died the first time we had this discussion, and he agreed to find an alternate way to contact me. There was no way his and Golden's phones were dead, and if my assumption was correct, Sal's as well.

No one deigned to answer him, and it took me a moment to realize my phone was vibrating in my hands. For just a moment, my heart lifted with hope. For just a second, I willed it to be one of the guys telling us we were overreacting. The moment I saw Nina's name, my idealistic thoughts were dashed away.

Mary Poppins: Not since this morning. Everything okay?

When I met Nina, she immediately reminded me of a Hispanic version of Mary Poppins. She came highly recommended, and I understood why. She was the right mixture of nurturing, strict, attentive, professional, and personable. The kids took to her almost immediately.

Grandpa seemed at ease with her presence as well. He'd already thanked Sal profusely for his recommendation.

I twisted my ring in consternation. I didn't want to worry her. However, I thought she had the right to know her brother had disappeared without telling any of us. It wasn't like him at all.

Me: Not sure. Des went to check on him, and he wasn't in his room. A few of the guys went out tonight and I hoped he was with them.

Mary Poppins: It's not like him not to communicate… He typically over-shares…

I sighed as I contemplated my next response. "Nina says she hasn't heard from Sal since this morning," I told the guys. "When was the last time you saw him, Des?"

"We had dinner. Sal cleaned up. I told him I was hopping in the shower and turning in early. He said he was going to video chat with his kids and then probably to go to sleep as well," Desmond answered. "This isn't like him. I don't know where he would have gone."

"I don't know if I should hope he's with the guys or not," I murmured almost to myself.

I peered down at my phone and typed out a quick text.

Me: Thanks. I'll let you know if we see Sal or talk to him.

Nina: Please do!

I heard Lochlann curse, and my heart lodged itself into my stomach. I looked up from my phone. The unmistakable signs of smoke plumes rose from the right of us. My phone fell from my numb fingers.

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"Shit! Shit! Shit," Paxton kept repeating as we sped down the driveway.

Kyler's house, the one that was supposed to be going on the market soon, was a quaint bungalow with several outbuildings and acres surrounding it. He had just shown me the pictures the realtor took the other day. I promised him I would come to visit the property on the open house day.

"He said he'd set Kyler's properties on fire if we kept contacting Crew," I rasped as I gripped tightly to Lochlann's hand.

He squeezed it back, and I couldn't help but notice he wasn't giving me empty platitudes. None of them were. They were feeling just as anxious as I was.

I tried to keep the anxiety at bay. I needed to keep my shit together. Now was not the time to succumb to the panic threatening to suffocate me.

Zane let out a loud expletive. "Kyler's truck." He pointed to Kyler's work truck tucked back by the detached garage.

I whimpered when I realized that the guys were nowhere to be seen. Had Butch or his gang came through with their threats? If so, where were Kyler and Golden, and why would Kyler's truck be here?

"Could he have taken them somewhere else?" It was my turn to postulate explanations I didn't believe in.

Lochlann barely had the SUV in park before we were all hopping out.

"Who is *he*, and why would he threaten to set Kyler's properties on fire?" Desmond nearly yelled over the roaring fire.

I stared up at the house in horror and fear, frozen for a moment. The front was completely engulfed in flames. Even from a distance we stood at, I could feel the heat emanating off of it.

"Later," Lochlann insisted before he went running towards the house. "We need to find them. Check the house first. Golden! Kyler!" he immediately began yelling.

It was the first time I had ever witnessed Lochlann close to losing it, and it seemed to prompt me into movement. I began running towards the back of the house. I hoped the flames hadn't or would reach it by the time we got there.

"Call 9-1-1!" Lochlann hollered over his shoulder.

I realized I no longer had my phone in my hand. It must have fallen on the floorboard of the SUV.

Paxton and I looked at each other. "I got it," he reassured me as he ran and dialed the numbers at the same time.

As I neared the corner of the house, I stumbled and realized I tripped over a bucket. It looked like the tilers had left their buckets outside. I could see the cleaned floaters leaning against the concrete foundation drying out.

"Over here!" Lochlann yelled from up ahead. "I see them!"

I watched as he reached out to grab the handle of the newly installed French doors and immediately pulled his hand back with a grimace. Zane looked torn between examining Lochlann's hand and figuring out another way to get into the house.

Lochlann gripped his wrist, shaking his injured hand, and spoke to Zane. I couldn't hear his words, but I could determine that the handle was too hot even to touch.

Suddenly I was struck with the memory of shows I had watched in the past. Without hesitation, I pulled off my hoodie then my Henley. I needed them wet. The dampened cloth could provide us with a barrier against the hot handles, and if when we were able to get in, we could use it as a barrier against the smoke in the house.

"What are you doing?" Des asked in distress.

"Take off your t-shirt, dip it in the bucket!" I yelled over the roaring fire.

A loud crack like thunder had us both jumping back in shock and fear. I realized then it was the sound of a part of the house collapsing in on itself. Lochlann and Zane screamed Golden's, Kyler's, and Sal's names simultaneously. Their grief-stricken faces were enough to have me moving once more. I balled up my shirt and dunked it into the water bucket. The contrast of the heat from the burning house and cold water was jarring.

Desmond seemed to understand what my intentions were as he removed his coat and t-shirt. As I donned my sweatshirt back on, I watched him dunk his shirt in. I ran ahead, not waiting on him.

I couldn't control my shriek of devastation as I peered into the house through the French doors. I could see Kyler, Sal, and Golden tied to kitchen chairs. Their heads were lolled forward. I noticed Sal had a wound on his right shoulder, and blood stained the entire side of his body. Golden's left arm was at an awkward angle, making me believe it was broken. And Kyler didn't even have a shirt on. I could see the bruises littering his body even from this distance.

I must have been yanking on the door for some time before I realized I could still feel the heat radiating off of it. It would have burned me if I didn't have my hand wrapped in my cold, wet top.

"It's locked," I sobbed.

"Stand back." Lochlann gently touched my shoulder.

Zane and Lochlann lifted their feet simultaneously and, with great force, sent their shoes into the glass panes. I couldn't even hear the shattering glass over the sound of the howling fire. Zane barely had his foot removed before I was moving in with my shirt-clad arm. I barely registered the pain as shards of glass scraped across my forearm. I was running on pure adrenaline as I reached up and turned the deadbolt to unlock it.

"Peyton!" Paxton cried in concern as he wrapped his arms around my waist and gently extracted me from the door.

"Kyler! Golden! Sal!" I screamed, my voice bordering on hysterics as I struggled to get out of Paxton's embrace.

They were so close yet so far away. I screamed once more as another crack rent the air, and I witnessed one of the trusses, barely ten feet away from the guys, collapse. Flames licked the walls surrounding them, swimming slowly over the ceiling above them.

Desmond yanked open the door with his shirt-clad hands as he dropped the bucket at Zane and Lochlann's feet. "Dip your shirts in the water, try to keep your mouth and nose covered," he hollered.

I finally broke free from Paxton's hold and evaded his hands from reaching for me as I stumbled forward. Smoke billowed out and burned my eyes, causing the guys to blur in front of me. I tied my shirt around the lower portion of my face as I heard Paxton and Zane yelling at me to stay outside.

I wouldn't. I couldn't. I ran with single-mindedness towards Sal, Kyler, and Golden.

Lochlann reached Golden at the same time I arrived next to Kyler. "Get out of here, Peyton!" he yelled through his mouth covering.

"No!" I yelled back as tears ran down my face, a mixture of panic, despair, and smoke causing them to flow freely.

I knew there was no way I could drag Kyler out, still attached to the chair. My fingers shook as I scrambled to the back of the chair. I didn't want to see if I could feel a pulse or if I could see their chest rise and fall with each breath. I tried to ignore the bruise on Sal's jaw and the multiple bruises and cuts on Golden's and Kyler's faces. I tried to focus on the knots binding them together.

A strangled cry rose from my throat when I realized the knots were tied too tightly. My eyes frantically searched for anything to cut them with moments before my eyes lighted on Kyler's work boots.

"Please, please, please," I prayed to God. I was pleading to Kyler.

He had always carried those damn Gerbers around with him. *Please, let him have one now.*

As I reached into his boot, I noticed Paxton and Lochlann attempting to free Golden, while Des knelt beside Sal. Zane fell beside me and began to struggle with the bindings in vain.

I cried out in relief as my fingers wrapped around the cool steel. I willed my hands to stop shaking as I extracted it. I pushed the side button, and various tools were at my disposal. The blood from my cuts ran down my arm and made my fingers slippery, but I had no extra hands nor time to stave off my own bleeding. It took me three attempts before I located the saw-like knife. I immediately began to work on the rope.

I noticed Des was taking a different approach and had found a box-cutter that must have been forgotten by one of the construction crew. Tickling at the back of my throat indicated that the wet shirt over my mouth and nose hadn't made me entirely immune to the heavy smoke surrounding us.

"Loch!" I shoved the tool at him before I grabbed Kyler under the armpits.

"He's too heavy!" Zane yelled at me.

"He's not!" I insisted.

I knew I was less than half his body weight, but Zane didn't realize that adrenaline and love could make the slightest of us hella strong. I didn't doubt my ability to at least be able to drag him to safety. I would have to pray he wasn't so hurt that moving Kyler would cause further damage. We had no other options.

They had been breathing in this smoke for entirely too long. Kyler, Golden, and Sal's physical wounds would have to be examined after we carried-dragged them to safety.

Zane must have realized it was fruitless to argue with me, because he popped up and took Kyler's other side. Together we were able to get him off the chair. I let out a sound when I felt his full weight, but my determination and desolation spurred me forward.

With every step we dragged him closer to safety, my mind began attacking me with a vengeance.

I began to wonder if it had been smart to tell the guys about Butch cornering me. I started to blame myself. I shouldn't have told them. Then Golden wouldn't have left in a rage, followed shortly by Kyler. I had put them in danger.

"This is probably far enough." Zane gasped in deep lung-fulls of fresh air.

I blinked, realizing I had been so deep inside my self-flagellation I hadn't even realized that we had managed to drag Kyler through the house, out of the house, over the patio, and at least thirty yards into the back yard.

"Stay here," Lochlann yelled at Zane and me as he deposited Golden beside Kyler, "I'm gonna help Pax and Des with Sal!"

I blinked back my tears and watched as he ran back towards the burning house. I nearly sighed with relief when I finally saw Paxton and Des struggling with Sal's weight through the smoke. Lochlann was within about ten feet of them.

I turned my attention back to Kyler and reached out my hand to touch his pulse at his neck. I cried out in relief when I realized he had one. Zane was kneeling beside Golden, examining him.

"I got a pulse," I informed him.

"Me too," his head was lowered to Golden's mouth, "and he's breathing!" he nearly sobbed in relief.

My adrenaline was still racing through my body. Between the sounds of the fire and the sound of my own racing heartbeat in my ears, I was having difficulty feeling or hearing if Kyler was breathing. I tilted his head back to make sure his airways weren't obstructed and lowered my head once more. When I felt the caress of his breath against my cheek, I collapsed on my butt with relief.

"He's breathing, but it's thready," I sobbed in relief and fear.

They weren't out of the woods yet. They were unconscious, and even though they were still breathing, we had no clue how much damage Butch and/or his men had done, nor the havoc the smoke had wreaked.

Another loud crack rent the air, and my head snapped back to investigate the noise. I watched in horror as the roof of the house

collapsed. My eyes darted from the sound to where Paxton, Lochlann, Des, and Sal had been moments before. I could no longer see them through the flames and smokes. The sounds of fire trucks, police sirens, and a loud high-pitched wail filled my ears.

I struggled to get up and run towards the house. I wanted to investigate the last distressing noise, but my mind was focused on getting back to the house. I needed to find my guys, Sal and Des. It wasn't until I felt Zane wrap his arms and bodily lift me away from the danger that I realized that the last sound was coming from me. He was crying and shaking his head at me. His mouth was moving, but I was unable to hear a single word.

This time, all my adrenaline and desperation failed me as I tried to free myself and reach my guys.

I bent over, hyperventilating as I inhaled smoke. White spots danced before my eyes as I desperately attempted to breathe. As the black crowded my vision, I realized once again that when my mind was more than willing, my body was failing me. No matter *how* much I willed my legs to run to Paxton and Lochlann, they couldn't. No matter *how* much I prayed that fresh air would fill my lungs, it wouldn't. No matter *how* much I fought the blackness threatening to swallow away my consciousness. I had failed.

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Emotions Vs. Feelings

Consciousness slowly seeped into my brain, and I attempted to gain my bearings. The tick-tock of a loud clock filled my ears, along with an incessant beeping. I noticed something was snugly affixed to my face, and when I felt the gentle caress of air, I realized it must be a breathing apparatus. I then realized I had an IV attached to my hand.

My eyes opened, and it took some time for the room to come into focus, but I instantly recognized the sterilized environment. The events of the night came rushing back, and I immediately struggled to sit up as I heard a distant sound of a door opening. I looked down and realized, once again, I was in a hospital gown, my arm wrapped in gauze.

I immediately reached up to remove my mask with a single focus. I needed to find the guys. A chasm opened in my chest, and I began to panic as despair reminded me of why I didn't remember yet another trip to the hospital.

"Lochlann! Paxton!" I called out.

"Everything's okay," I heard a stern male voice speak.

"Where are they?" I demanded as my chest tightened.

I grasped my chest in panic as the man proceeded forward, reaching for me. My alarm was now of another kind as I assessed his dark hair and blue eyes. My fractured mind immediately correlated Tormentor's similar coloring with this man, even though my logical side realized this man was older, average looking, and wasn't nearly as fit.

The pragmatic part of me recognized that he was wearing a white coat with *Dr. Harold Madden* printed on a badge affixed to the pocket. I saw the stethoscope hanging around his neck and realized he was a doctor.

But that splintered part of me was unable to compute any of those things, and my fight or flight defense mechanism was engaged.

“Noo!” I wailed as I tried to bat his hand away. “No! No! No!”

I began gasping for air as the door was pushed open once more, and a woman dressed in nurse scrubs came running in, followed by Dr. Bryce Baylor.

“It’s okay, Peyton,” Bryce reassured me, gently pushing the other doctor aside and looking at him. “I specifically asked you to wait for my arrival,” he hissed in irritation to the other man.

I’d never seen Bryce show any negativity towards another person. Not even when Diane had crossed a line. That time, he had been cold but in total control of his emotions. He was always pleasant, and his mere presence always calmed me.

“It’s absurd−” the older man began to sputter.

“Your presence is no longer needed,” Bryce harshly cut him off before taking a seat on the edge of my bed.

Without hesitation, he grabbed my hands, holding them in a comforting manner. His own were cool but familiar. I realized I was still thrashing about, and my breathing was coming in shorter gasps.

“Five things that you see, Peyton,” he steadily commanded me.

I was desperately trying to breathe and push the darkness away. It didn’t help that the nurse and other doctor were looking at me like I was a freak. Bryce must have noticed how uncomfortable I am.

“You may leave,” Bryce said in a tone that brooked no argument.

The nurse gave me a sympathetic look. “Page me if you need me, Dr. Baylor,” she said softly.

“But−” Dr. Madden began to protest.

“She’s *my* patient,” Bryce reminded him callously. “And your presence is causing her further distress.”

Dr. Madden loudly huffed before storming out of the room.

“Five things that you see, Peyton Delaney,” Bryce insisted once more.

Dr. Bryce Baylor was a tall, lean, attractive man. Behind his wire-framed glasses, I had previously noted his eyes were hazel. They were a mixture of greens, browns, and amber. Today, the green− almost the shade of limes− was popping out more than the other colors. They were pretty, a fact I vaguely registered.

“What did you see?” he inquired after a moment or two.

In addition to his eyes, I noted the gauze around my forearm, the dried blood on my wrist, my ring, and the tube sticking out of my hand.

“Your eyes remind me of limes. They’re pretty,” I blurted out.

I immediately saw his cheeks go red as he ducked his head. It was odd to see a man in his mid to late twenties capable of blushing. However, it just comforted me further, noting the quirk.

I knew he was brilliant and had graduated college years before most of his peers. I also recognized he was on the introverted side, despite his personable nature and profession.

“Four things you feel?” he murmured next.

I felt the tightness begin to ease more as I realized that he grasped how Lochlann had calmed me down after my first panic attack. I closed my eyes and sighed, noticing how his hands had warmed up in mine and the gentle caress of his thumb against my palm.

I was conflicted with the warmth that entered my chest. I shouldn’t feel so comfortable with Bryce. I shouldn’t seek the same solace in him as I did with my guys.

“My guys,” I breathed out, my breathing normal once more. “Sal? Desmond?” I added, thinking of my bodyguards and the lengths they had gone through to ensure my safety and that of my guys.

I instinctively knew that Salvatore had somehow, someway found out my guys were in trouble and located them.

Bryce grimaced and began to pull away. I felt lost and bereft without his touch. I wanted the comfort he had brought me. Reflexively, I reached out and grabbed his hand in mine. I didn’t recognize the sound of distress that left me as I started to panic.

Were they okay? Did the police and firemen come in time?!

Holding his hand, I didn't want to dissect my feelings and emotions with regard to Bryce right now. I knew he represented understanding and familiarity. He had "cared" for me at several low-points in my life.

He seemed to understand my need for the contact, though, and proceeded to continue the feather-light touch of his thumb.

"They're alive," he hastily reassured me. "All of them, including your bodyguards."

Relief flooded me, and my eyes filled with tears at the news. I sagged into myself and immediately felt Bryce pull me against him, gently rubbing my back. Again, his touch brought comfort and confusion.

I leaned my head against his shoulder. He tensed for a moment before he leaned in closer, offering me the support I desperately craved. Then I realized he had said they were alive. Not that they were okay.

"But?" I prodded him in a small voice.

"I'm not sure how much I should disclose." He grimaced as he looked over his shoulder, ensuring the room was empty.

"Please," I gently begged him. "Or I'll go look for them myself."

He shook his head, and the corner of his mouth lifted slightly. He knew how stubborn I could be. He was silent for a moment, and I realized he was struggling with how much he should disclose to me.

"Kyler and Golden are in ICU. Both suffered from severe smoke inhalation," he explained softly. "They were beaten pretty severely. Kyler has three broken ribs, a fractured wrist, and a concussion. Golden has a broken arm and hasn't woken up yet, but all his brain scans appear normal. They'll probably be here for several days.

"Lochlann and Paxton have mild smoke inhalation. However, they have second-degree burns that we would like to monitor for at least the next twenty-four hours. I imagine they'll be transferring up here shortly. Paxton," he gave me a rueful smile, "hasn't been the easiest patient to deal with."

I stifled the inappropriate laughter as my vivid imagination imagined Paxton raising hell wherever he was. With his separation

issues, I wasn't surprised that he was more worried about me than himself.

"He insists that he see you," Bryce continued. "Even though Zane told him you were fine, except for your lacerations on your arm."

I breathed out in relief, thankful at least one of my guys hadn't been admitted. I tried to focus on Bryce's words once more.

"Any deeper and you would have had to get stitches. I'm sending you home with some cream. Follow the instructions on the prescription."

"What was this for?" I indicated my IV and the mask.

"When I was notified of your condition, I told them to start fluids and put you on oxygen before I got here. I'd much rather be safe than sorry."

I nodded, thankful once more that I had inherited Bryce as a doctor.

"The good news is that your chest scans came back clear," he continued. "It doesn't look like you suffered from the smoke. Your throat may be irritable for a few days, and I recommend that you stay hydrated just in case. I would like you to take a day or two off from dance." At my look, he emitted a sound similar to a snort, and it shocked me. "Fine. Take it easy then? And keep listening to your body."

He wasn't typically so expressive. However, it brought me ease knowing he was comfortable enough to treat me like a friend and not a patient.

I nodded as my mind spun in circles at all the information. My head began to throb from the worry that was weighing on me. Golden and Kyler were getting care, but they were still in the intensive care unit. I understood that patients there were in critical condition. A part of me wanted to give in to the tears that threatened to spill over, but the other part of me urged me to be tougher.

I was no use curled up in a ball and melting down when the guys needed me. They had been with me over and over again through my own struggles. Never once did they falter or give in to their fears. If they had, I never saw it. And I didn't count the time when Paxton had had to walk away from my recounting the time I'd

spent in the cabin. Amazingly, he had been taking care of himself for once.

It was time I was there for them.

I couldn't allow the what if's to spin me in a detrimental spiral. I couldn't let my dark thoughts suck me into their treacherous grasps. This wasn't about me. This was about them and what I could do to be there for them.

"How's Sal and Des?" I swallowed the lump in my throat.

He gently pushed my hair back from my face, and I realized the horrible smell of smoke clinging to each tress. I didn't know if I'd ever be able to sit next to a bonfire ever again without reliving the terror I had experienced tonight.

"Salvatore also has moderate smoke inhalation and a gunshot wound to his shoulder. He was lucky that the bullet went through. He just got out of surgery a little bit ago, but the doctors are optimistic about his recovery. Desmond has a few first-degree burns and is currently talking to your…uh, David and your grandpa."

Recently I had begun seeing David as more than just David the Sperm Donor. However, I wasn't ready to call him *Dad* or any other similar title. He had done a complete turnaround, but there was so much more he had to atone for. I was beginning to forgive him. I was just finding it difficult to forget right now.

"What happened, Peyton?" Bryce inquired in concern.

I knew it was Bryce, the man, asking, and not Bryce, my doctor.

I tried to gather my thoughts. A lot was going on in my head. I vaguely registered that it was almost six o'clock in the morning. I had lost another six hours of my life. I didn't know how I always found myself in these situations.

"You don't have to tell me," he said.

I noticed the hurt in his voice, and I shook my head.

I knew I'd become more than a patient to him. I knew he cared for me on another level. How much, I… wasn't sure, and that further confused me. At the same time, I felt guilty that I was seeking solace from him and that I cared about hurting his feelings. It almost felt like I was emotionally betraying my guys.

"Are you from around here, Bryce?" I finally inquired.

He shook his head with a touch of surprise. He always seemed surprised when I called him by his first name, even though he'd insisted on it several times.

"No. I moved here approximately four years ago and pretty much keep to myself." He almost seemed embarrassed to admit it.

"Well," I drawled out, trying to collect my thoughts, "Kyler and Crew Fairchild's father is known as the go-to man for all things illegal. A few years ago, he skipped town when he was tipped off that the ATF was closing in on his operations. He was lying low but still managed to keep his business running. He's back, and somehow he's managed to convince Crew to work for him." My voice was breaking, filled with hurt and anger.

I longed to reach out to Crew and ask him if he knew what Butch had done, that his own father had left Kyler, Golden, and Sal to burn to death in one of Kyler's houses. I knew without a shadow of a doubt, whether indirectly or directly, Butch was involved. How much did Crew know? Would he still stay with Butch if he knew?

No! I knew without a shadow of a doubt he wouldn't be able to live with that guilt knowing his brother and best friend could have died tonight at the hands of his father. He would have warned them or gotten them out of there. Once again, conflicting emotions were raging within.

"Crew? Really?" Bryce frowned. He was clearly as confused as I was.

I nodded and swallowed back more tears. "We've been worried about Crew. He won't talk to us and yesterday Butch threatened me and warned us away from Crew. He said if we continued attempting to contact Crew and tried to convince him to return to us, he would set Kyler's properties on fire. Golden found out that Butch had nicked me with his knife yesterday and flew into a rage. Kyler chased after him. The longer it took them to return, the more worried I got. Finally, we decided we needed to find them. Paxton remembered about the tracker Golden had on his phone, and we tracked him down.

"We were too late," my voice finally cracked, and I remembered the guys tied up, beaten, broken, and left to die in the raging fire. "If I would have listened to my gut a little sooner, we

could have stopped it. It was my fault they were there to begin with. I know how much of a hothead Golden and Kyler can be."

Bryce gingerly embraced me and made shushing noises. "Shh, shh, shh," he tenderly bade me. "He had no right to threaten you. And you can't take the blame in any way. You guys got there on time. They're alive. You guys rescued them from the house. I heard you and Zane managed to drag Kyler to safety. *You*," he reminded me. "You've already proven time and time again how strong you are, but under normal circumstances, two healthy grown men would have found it difficult to lift a man of Kyler's size to safety. Yet you accomplished the task."

I tried to stop my tears, but now that they've started, I found it hard to stop them. Bryce continued to comfort me, murmuring reassurances, and it took me a moment to realize the additional hushed voices in the room. Bryce seemed to notice them at the same time, because he stiffened slightly and hastily pulled away.

I looked up and noticed Zane, Grandpa, and David poised near the door. Grandpa looked devastated as he took in my appearance. David's concerned eyes focused on the bandage covering my forearm. And Zane seemed plain confused as he looked between Bryce and me.

I realized then that maybe I shouldn't have sought solace in Bryce. Perhaps I should have seen about getting released so I could make my rounds and visit the guys and Sal.

The guilt and confusion were back.

I once read that the main difference between *emotions* and *feelings* was that emotions were physical states, whereas feelings were mental associations. Had the emotions Bryce stirred in me turned into feelings? Surely not. I was happily dating six… well, five guys now. My heart skipped a beat in near physical pain at the mere thought of Crew.

Were these new tumultuous feelings for Bryce stemming from the loss, pain, and hurt I felt from losing Crew?

Or were they there because, each time I'd hit rock bottom, he had also been there for me, quietly in the background, urging me to get better?

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“I don’t want to leave them,” I admitted quietly to Zane. We were in Paxton and Lochlann’s hospital room, staying the night. I could have cried when Heather, Marie, Freddy, and Renee showed up earlier with dinner, a change of clothes, and toiletries. I had been disgusted by how I felt and smelled all day, but I was so focused on the guys I forgot the little things, like changing into clean clothes, eating, and showering.

After Zane and I filled Grandpa and David in on the rest of yesterday’s events, Bryce released me with my prescription and further discharge instructions. I then went down to see Kyler and Golden. Golden still hadn’t woken up, and Kyler had been placed in a medical coma.

“Me neither,” Zane admitted.

“I’m scared,” I confessed next.

He pulled me in closer. My head was now cradled on his chest, and the rhythm of his heartbeat against my ear was soothing, making me almost forget that my world was crumbling around me. In the shelter of his arms, I felt emboldened. He was helping me keep it together for my guys. I tried not to think about how critical Kyler’s and Golden’s conditions were. But it was hard.

The doctors had found some swelling on Kyler’s brain that they were concerned about. It took all my resolve and power not to succumb to panic and hysteria as they calmly informed us that it was for the best to put him in a coma. They explained that a medically induced coma was one option they decided to use to protect Kyler’s brain after the severe trauma he sustained, that in doing so, it might help his brain begin to heal.

The idea of him having long-term side effects from his trauma and/or death terrified me. I was nearly suffocating from the pressure in my chest and brain. The urge to crumble was my constant companion.

“Me, too, but they're strong. Golden and Kyler have been through worse,” he reassured me, although I heard his fear mirroring mine.

It felt like my heart was splitting in two. I had to step up and take care of the kids while Lochlann and Paxton healed. I had to be

there for them. However, I was leaving pieces of myself in this hospital.

Golden and Kyler were going to remain in intensive care until they showed signs of improvement. I didn't think I had ever prayed as much as I had been, standing over their beds and watching my strong, powerful men reduced to being bedridden and fighting for their lives.

I stayed and talked to them until the nurses kicked us out. I truly believed that a person in that state could still hear us. I talked myself raw while I encouraged them to get better and return to me. I regaled them with some of my fondest memories. I divulged the biggest dreams of my future, *our* future.

I explained the home I wished to live in one day, all of us, together. I let them know I expected at least three or four kids from them. In addition to Clay and Maisie, of course. I even admitted to them the idea of fostering children and possibly adopting them; an idea I had been playing with lately. After I'd heard all the stories of Da and Mam's impact on the lost and bent, I let them know I would love to carry on their legacy.

"I can't believe Sal still wants to come with us to the city." I snorted.

When I visited Sal, I was relieved to find out his prognosis was good, not great, but good. He required ventilation, and his arm would need to heal, but the doctors were more hopeful for a swift recovery for him. He had woken up several times and seemed eager to leave the hospital with or without a doctor clearing him.

"Well, I'm not terribly surprised. I don't think I've seen a bigger fanboy. Ever." Zane chuckled. "He wouldn't want to miss meeting his favorite band!"

Anya had visited us earlier, and she asked us what we were going to do in a few days, when we were expected back at the city. My immediate response was to stay here and take care of my guys and the kids. I could put my dreams on hold for them. They were worth it.

Lochlann and Paxton, however, were adamant that we still go. They reassured us that a lot could happen in five days, and they were optimistic Kyler and Golden would be out of the woods soon.

They insisted that even if they weren't, they wouldn't want us to miss this opportunity.

Our support system went beyond us, and we knew that. Even Anya had volunteered to help wherever needed with the children, as well as with Paxton and Lochlann.

"It's the least he deserves," I hummed in agreement.

Earlier, we had been filled in about the rest of last night's events from Grandpa and David. Golden had been able to hunt down one of Butch's dens, and there, he witnessed product being moved. He laid in wait for Crew or Butch. Kyler was finally able to locate Golden just as Priscilla, Jana, and a few other people of varying ages and races rolled out.

But they never saw the three men that were part of Butch's security. They knocked them out and bound them until Butch was able to arrive. They hadn't been the brightest men and never checked for weapons or cell phones. Unfortunately, Kyler hadn't been able to reach his Gerber, but he still had his phone.

Kyler had managed to place a phone call. In his bound state, he was only able to call the last number he had used. It so happened to be Sal's.

Sal had run out to get a six-pack of beer after he had talked to his kids. Since he was off the next day− technically today− he decided a couple of beers before bed would calm his nerves from the drama his ex was starting. Sal hadn't verified that the text he sent Des had gone through in his rush to get to the guys. Once he realized the blunder, he had reached a dead zone on his cell phone and decided helping the guys was more important than calling for backup.

By then, Butch had transferred Kyler and Golden to Kyler's flip-house. He and Kyler exchanged words resulting in Butch ordering his guys to rough up Golden and Kyler. Later, Kyler said something that truly set Butch off. Unfortunately, Sal was unable to hear the conversation. Whatever it was, it was enough for Butch and his guys to throw additional life-threatening blows. When Butch got tired, he ordered Golden and Kyler's death.

Sal had been hiding at the back of the house as they set the front on fire. The moment he thought the coast was clear, he snuck

in through the French doors. One of Butch's men must have realized he left evidence behind and had gone back to the house, because when he returned, Sal shot him. Four other men came in as a result of the gunshot. Sal had shot them as well, but Butch managed to shoot back, hitting Sal in the arm and leaving him momentarily vulnerable. After that, Sal had no memory of what occurred next, but he figured he was eventually knocked out by one of Butch's men, then tied up, leaving him to die as well.

"I've always liked Sal," Zane agreed as he ran his hands through my damp hair, gently detangling any knots my brush hadn't found. I closed my eyes in contentment as I slipped my hand under his shirt, needing to feel his healthy body against my fingertips. I inhaled his fresh, clean scent and relaxed further.

If Grandpa and David weren't on the warpath now, I knew they would have insisted that we rest, recover, and regroup. However, they were more determined now than ever to shut down Butch's operations for good.

Heather, Marie, Freddy, and Marie had stuck around and had hung out with us until the guys started getting tired. Our friends made us promise to call them if we needed them. Somehow, I truly believed they would be there for us if we did.

The longer Zane stroked my hair, the more I calmed down. I could feel sleep tug on my consciousness, and I had a feeling Zane was close as well. The couch bed we were sleeping on was beyond my expectations. It was by far the most comfortable couch bed I had ever slept on.

Grandpa had pulled some strings, so Lochlann and Paxton were now in a room more befitting a hotel than a hospital. The doctors believed if infection or any other complications didn't arise, they would be released in a day or two.

Tonight, Zane and I had been unwilling to leave them. Maisie and Clay were well cared for and had no clue that their impromptu sleepover at Grandpa's was out of necessity and not something exciting and new to experience. Well, for Maisie. Clay had no clue what was going on and didn't seem to miss any of us yet.

Zane took a deep breath in. "So, Dr. Baylor?" he gently prodded.

I felt immediate guilt. My feelings towards Bryce were so disconcerting.

“You know he has feelings for you,” he added after a beat of silence.

“I always thought he was a great doctor,” I confessed. “But today, when he calmed me down, I was… confused. I love you guys. I’m happy with you all.”

“He’s a good guy,” he said. “I like him. I’m not sure if Paxton will, though.”

I was shocked into silence, trying to formulate a response. Was he saying it was okay to have these turbulent emotions towards another man?

“I−” I began.

“Shh, beautiful,” he gently said. “It’s been an emotional night for you. Sleep. We can worry about all this other stuff later.”

I nodded, liking the sound of that. I couldn’t trust my emotions right now.

Later on, in the semi-darkness, I listened to Lochlann and Paxton’s monitors and Zane’s deep breathing. My mind and emotions were still in a tumultuous state, but my body was tired from everything it had been forced through, so I finally succumbed to slumber. I just hoped and prayed dreams of the fire and/or Tormentor stayed at bay tonight.

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Weathering the Storm

I could hear voices raised in irritation the moment I stepped off the elevator. I couldn't help but smile. Generally, hearing raised voices wasn't a cause for comfort for me, but in this case, it brought me pure joy. It meant another one of my guys was well enough to express ire.

I rounded the corner, carrying my duffel bag with a change of clothing and toiletries. In my other hand, I held a drink tray with two large strawberry and banana milkshakes.

My cheeks almost hurt by the grin spreading across my face. Golden was fighting with a nurse. Again. He called her "Nurse Ratched." Her real name was Kimmy. She was a hard-ass, but that was why I loved her. She wasn't swayed by his pretty smiles, gentle cajoling, and blatant flirting.

Golden was itching to leave the hospital. He had woken up and gained consciousness the day after his attack, spending most of that day sleeping on and off. By the second day, he was demanding his release. However, the doctors wanted to observe him for a while longer. Luckily, he had Grandpa in his corner and private doctors at his disposal.

I was here to deliver the news, and I knew *Nurse Ratched* was well aware of it. I didn't put it past her to torture him a tad longer, though. He thoroughly deserved it, in a way. He had turned downright cantankerous, taking out his frustrations on her one too many times when he realized he couldn't flirt his way into getting what he wanted.

"That's the fifth time you've checked my blood pressure in the last hour," Golden griped loudly. "It hasn't changed. I'm fine! I think you secretly just want to caress my bulging biceps."

"I've seen better muscle definition on my seniors when I worked at the nursing home," the nurse quipped without skipping a beat.

“Along with their saggy balls,” Golden grumbled waspishly. “When’s Doc coming by?” he added. “I don’t need the stupid breathing thing anymore. I’m more than hydrated. You removed that invasive tube from the place it ought not to have been. I was able to make pee-pee on my own. I walked the halls yesterday. I think I’ve proved I can handle the rest of my recuperation at home.”

She snorted. “Yet we found you ‘resting’ on a bench near the gift shop.”

I shook my head, just as frustrated as I was when Zane and I, and a handful of nurses, had to go on a massive manhunt for him last night. We had come to visit him and Kyler. Imagine my surprise when Golden wasn’t in his room. The nurse who had come to take his vitals couldn’t find him either.

The A-hole had decided to prove that he was strong enough to leave. He’d taken a stroll to Kyler’s room; from there, he went to the cafeteria to get ice cream, then he wandered over to the gift shop. Eventually, we found him on the bench by the gift shop.

He was fast asleep.... with a pink teddy bear, a blue teddy bear, flowers, and a melted popsicle. He claimed he had wanted to bring home teddy bears for Maisie and Clay, the flowers were for me, and the popsicle was for Kyler, even though Kyler wasn’t allowed to have anything but water. Kyler had just woken up. I had cried happy tears when they took him off the meds that had induced his coma. Within a few hours, he was awake. The doctors finally gave us a more hopeful recovery prognosis. They marveled at how determined he was to recuperate.

“It was a social experiment,” Golden grumbled.

“And what kind was that?” I finally spoke up in a dry tone. “Was it to see how many people were willing to approach a deranged-looking man? You haven’t showered in days. Your hair is a hot mess. And you were still in your hospital gown. Your red undies were on display for everyone and their brother to see. You’re wearing a cast. You still look like you went ten rounds with Tyson, Ali, and Sugar Ray and had your ass handed to you several times over. Why would anyone approach you to see if you were okay?”

I had gotten to the point I had to find another way to cope with their injuries rather than fussing over them. It was so hard seeing the

bruises marring their faces and bodies from Butch and his men. They acted like it was no big deal and hated me hovering and coddling them−save Paxton. They had joked and mocked themselves so many times that I took my cue from them. If I continued to dwell on what could have happened and fret about them, I would make myself sick, physically and mentally, which wouldn't be beneficial for any of us.

"Hey, Darlin'." Golden grinned. "You didn't tell me goodbye this morning," he gently accused. "And they're boxer briefs, not undies. And it shouldn't matter what I look like. What is the world coming to when no one's willing to help a brother out?"

The smile he flashed didn't reach his eyes. Once again, he was carrying around guilt. I overheard him apologizing to Kyler while he was in his coma. He blamed himself for "flying off the handle" and getting them in the predicament of getting captured, beaten, and left to die.

I hadn't confronted him with his flawed logic, though. I knew he needed to process his emotions in his own way, and his physical recovery was more important at this point. When he was ready to talk, I would speak to him. If he waited too long, I would push him to discuss his issues and point out his faulty rationale.

I passed him a milkshake, and his ire was forgotten. He immediately took a long sip and sighed in pleasure and relief. His throat was still irritated, he'd said, so he only ate cold treats to soothe it. He failed even to notice the duffle bag I carried.

"Well, you looked like you slipped away from the psych ward," I deadpanned. "And because I was too busy rushing home getting you some clothes, body wash, shampoo, and a treat so we can spring you from this joint before the doctors change their mind…" I trailed off and shook the duffle bag.

By me running home, I meant Des. Grandpa tried to get him to take a few days off and recuperate, but he insisted he was fine and wanted to still watch over me. I appreciated his loyalty and definitely didn't want or need a new Shadow that didn't *get* me or the guys. He had never judged us, and he understood my need to split my time between Lochlann, Paxton, Golden, and Kyler.

I spent my days with Lochlann and Paxton, my nights with Golden and Kyler at the hospital these last few days. I alternated between the guy's hospital rooms. The nurses got to know me enough to look the other way when I slept a few hours with Ky. He was officially moving out of the ICU floor today. However, in ICU, they didn't allow overnight guests.

Golden's eyes widened, and his smile was genuine as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Are you serious? I'm busting out this place?"

"I figured you might want to take a shower first, but yes." I smiled.

"You gonna get nekkid and help me, darlin'?" he asked in a deep Southern drawl.

I tried to contain a smile but rolled my eyes as *Nurse Ratched* snorted loudly.

"Does that crap work on you?" she inquired with her own secret smile as she looked at me.

The truth was, I knew she had a soft spot for my stubborn Southern guy. She admitted as much. She had divulged that Golden could be her son's twin in both mannerisms and behavior. I also knew she had switched shifts with another nurse so she could be the primary nurse in charge of his care.

"He wished it would," I teased with a laugh.

She boisterously laughed as she ambled around the room. "You gotta keep boys like him on their toes," she warned me with a wink.

"Oh, I plan to." I grinned wickedly.

"Come on, darlin'. I don't want to get my cast wet, and it's too hard to wash my own hair," Golden pouted. "And I'm not a boy, Kimmy. I'm *all* man. Don't think I didn't notice you checking out my firm glutes when I walked to the bathroom this morning."

I scoffed loudly, knowing he was playing up his injuries for her benefit. He had no problem trying to prove how capable he was to get discharged up until this moment. Now he wanted to play the invalid to get me naked in the shower with him. Little did he know I would willingly shower with him without the helpless act.

On top of my abduction experience, this experience just proved to me how fleeting life could be. I should never take our time together for granted. Letting the guys know how much I loved them and showing them was my new mission.

“Kylie Jenner has a better ass than yours,” Kimmy derided him. “Before she had her implants, that is.”

Golden scowled playfully. “Nurse Ratched, I thought you were better than that. That gossip trash will rot your brain! That’s wrong with today’s culture; we *follow* the wrong people. Who cares who Miley Cyrus is seeing, or if Kylie Jenner got yet another plastic surgery procedure done?”

Kimmy sucked in her teeth. “Hey, I have to look at something while I’m waiting in the check-out lane. Plus, do you have room to talk? You wanna talk about what’s wrong with today’s culture? Let’s talk about how people are so sucked into their devices that they don’t pay attention to what’s going on around them. You’re glued to your phone when your girl isn’t around.”

I began to laugh. It was an argument we just had recently. Although, now that I knew Golden was “running” a business, I was a lot more understanding and lenient. It boggled my mind the money he was making for the kids’ college funds from the images Mam had taken. She was beyond talented, but I hadn’t realized how much those prints could cost just because she was the one who had taken them.

“I have a busy business to manage,” he protested. “Time stops for no one. Plus, I make sure Peyton knows she’s the center of my universe when she’s around. She’s all that matters.” He winked at me.

I laughed and shook my head. “Okay, Casanova, let’s get you in the shower so we can go see Ky in his new room.”

I was so happy one of my guys was coming home, but I knew I would be less restless once we were all back together again.

“I’ll get your discharge papers. Follow the at-home care sheet,” Kimmy said sternly. Then she looked at me. “I know he has trouble following directions, so you might have to help him,” Golden began to protest, but she held a hand up, “Unless you wanna spend some more time with me, I suggest you listen to your girlfriend.”

“You’re gonna miss me, admit it,” Golden spluttered in rebuttal. “I’m taking all this eye candy away. Don’t think I don’t know how you tell all your nurse friends about your hot patient in room 318.

“Like a hemorrhoid,” she teasingly scoffed before turning to leave. “Hot patient?” she snorted, “More like big-headed.”

I laughed in amusement while Golden scowled at her back.

“Wrap your arm so that *we* can take a shower,” I instructed Golden after the soft click of the door sounded in the silence.

As soon as my words sank in, Golden was off in a flash.

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“You’re such a tease,” Golden grumbled as I ran a washcloth over his hardening cock.

Even if Golden believed he was physically capable of doing everything and anything right now, I still insisted he sit on the bench in the shower. Admittedly, I had been teasing him as I washed every inch of his body with care and precision. I relished the fact that I was still capable of touching and worshipping every inch of him. I tried not to think about how close I had been to losing him, not just from the first time, but also from the fire. Losing all my guys, actually.

“It’s only teasing if I don’t do anything about it,” I rasped as I lowered my head and licked just the tip of him.

“Not fair,” he groaned as I continued to wash his thighs, knees, calves, and feet.

“What’s not fair?” I inquired guilelessly before taking him back in my mouth.

I sucked on him for just a moment, tasting the precum on the tip of my tongue, before I stood back up and picked up his shampoo.

“Close your eyes,” I instructed as I stepped in between his open legs.

I squeezed a dollop of liquid onto my hand. The second Golden complied, I began to rub the shampoo into his hair. I dug my fingertips into his scalp, giving him a massage while I simultaneously washed his hair. He moaned at my ministrations, and I might have mischievously rubbed my breast against his face as I did so.

“You’re so lucky I have a broken arm,” he growled. “Otherwise, I would have already lifted your tiny ass and fucked you

against this wall by now."

His words made me even more lustful. He was still mending, and I was purposefully teasing him, but I didn't know if he could physically give me what I really wanted in his condition. I didn't want to wear him out and set any of his progress back.

I rubbed my thighs together, instead, trying to ease the ache between my legs, knowing only one thing could reduce it.

I heard a dark chuckle before Golden leaned forward and took one of the peaks of my breasts into his mouth. His good hand, the left, caressed my ribs, hip, butt, and finally my thigh.

It was my turn to gasp as he tugged my nipples with enthusiasm into his hot mouth. His teeth gently scraped against one as he drew it in deeper. His fingers gently grazed against the apex of my thighs. His knuckles brushed against my aching bud. Now the shoe was definitely on the other foot as he teased me over and over again. He was so frustratingly close but not close enough.

He stopped suddenly and looked up at me through his lashes. He must have seen my hunger and desire, because he chuckled once more. "I have to admit, I was hoping our first time would be in a bed, but darlin', I really want− no, I *need* you. Right now."

The situation wasn't ideal, and there was a chance anyone could walk into the hospital room behind the locked steel door and hear us, but a part of me could care less.

"Are you sure?" I moaned as he took my other nipple into his mouth.

He didn't stop. He simply pulled me toward him. His meaning was clear. He wanted me to climb onto his lap and ride him. Who was I to deny him this intimacy? It had been a long time in coming, and I couldn't remember why it had taken so long for me to consummate our relationship. Sure, we had come close several times, but we were always interrupted, or something else held us back.

I straddled his lap and reached down to line up his hardness against my opening. I slowly sank down on him, and he pulled away from my nipple long enough to let out a long, low curse.

"Darlin," he groaned out as I got accustomed to his size, stretching me out. He was thick and hit me in different ways than the

others.

My body wasn't willing to wait for that long. The urge to ride Golden came hard and fast. I was mindful of his broken arm and the bruises littering his torso as I languidly gyrated my hips against him. His hungry mouth found mine as he moaned and groaned in pleasure. He nipped my bottom lip and then soothed it with a swipe of my tongue.

"I wanted to eat you out," he admitted between kisses. "I wanted to taste you. I need to lick you clean after you cum all over my tongue."

I whimpered as I imagined him doing just that. I found the rhythm and angle that had my clit vibrating against him. He moaned out and grasped my hip in a bruising grip at the new twist and tempo.

I quickened my pace, chasing my orgasm, as he tilted his hips up, hitting that delicious deep spot of mine that guaranteed a mind-blowing orgasm. I gripped his shoulder as he widened his legs, dropping my ass further and further down. He was making unintelligible sounds, and when I opened my eyes, the look of pure bliss on his face was empowering.

"That's it, Darlin'," he gasped. "Take my cock. Cum all over it. Use it. Let me feel you milk me dry."

I didn't know why dirty talk turned me on so much, but it did. I rode Golden hard and fast, understanding his need to go faster as he tugged my hips back and forth on him with one hand. The delicious sensation of the explosion was fast approaching. The ache deep within was building to a high crescendo. I could feel his thighs tense beneath me as I leaned back, gripping his thighs with one and holding onto his shoulder with the other.

His eyes were hooded and full of lust as he watched me work him− work us− over. "Now, darlin', now," he pleaded as he slammed his hips up to me.

He hit that spot with the right amount of forcefulness and had me reaching the top, falling into the sweet abyss. I leaned forward quickly, remembering where we were, and bit out my scream into his shoulder as stars erupted behind my eyelids. My muscles contracted around him, and my climax lasted long and hard. I whimpered when he grabbed my hip and made my sensitive clit roll over him as he

chased his own orgasm. He lowered his head into my shoulder, and the groan he emitted made me smile with satisfaction as he came.

Our ragged breathing was loud, even among the sound of the shower surrounding us. I noticed my hair had gotten slightly wet despite the fact I had purposefully pulled it up. But I couldn't even find the energy to care.

"I love you, Golden Alexander Graves," I admitted on a breathless moan as we held each other, both satisfied and replete.

He stilled in my arms, and I froze for a moment. I wanted to own my emotions, and I was determined that the guys knew how much they had come to mean to me. I thought he loved me too. Did I misread the situation?

He finally pulled back, and I could see the torment and glaze of unshed tears in his eyes. "Do you mean that?" he asked thickly.

"Without a shadow of a doubt," I confessed in a whisper as I pushed the long locks of waves off his face.

"I have anger issues," he declared quietly. "I thought Da had run it out of me. He taught me ways to process my emotions in a healthy way. But I failed him. I failed you."

I could physically see him swallow as he leaned his back against the shower stall.

He gently removed himself from me but pulled me in close immediately afterward. I couldn't pretend to care as I felt our combined juices leaving me.

I frowned, seeing the conviction in his eyes. "How so?"

"I saw red when I saw that Butch had nicked you with a knife," he replied hoarsely. "I wanted to kill him. I would have killed him for anything he did to you. Everything he did to Kyler and Crew growing up. I didn't think my actions through, though. If I had, I would have been more patient. I wouldn't have gotten Kyler and myself beaten and left to die. I thought I had become a more patient and logical man.

"You see, when I came to Mam and Da, I was broken mentally and emotionally. I was angry at my mom, angry at my grandma, angry at the foster care system, angry at my past foster parents, angry at the whole world. I processed all my emotions through hitting and hurting people. That's what I was raised to do. Getting hit and

hitting others was a regular occurrence in my life. My grandma abused my mother, allowed her boyfriends to use her sexually and physically, and got paid for it."

I stifled a gasp at his confession, listening to him as he continued.

"My grandma always justified her actions by 'loving' my mom and showering her with words and gifts she got from the money she received for pimping out her *own daughter*. It wasn't until my mom graduated from high school and met a traveling musician, my dad, that she found her escape. My dad took her away from my Grandma. They traveled a lot as he pursued his passion for playing and singing. A few months after he took my mom away, he finally got recognized for his talents. He became an opening act for a well-known country music star."

That explained how he was so talented when it came to music. I didn't know if his mother was musically inclined, but I'd heard that we picked up traits from our genes. Well, in theory. I read once that people born into musical families were fifty percent likely to be musically inclined as well.

"Shortly after that, Mom got pregnant with me."

His Southern drawl brought me from my musings.

"Dad helped heal her and found the help she needed, and they were happy. He continued to rise in fame, and Mom was content to follow him wherever he went. On the way back from one of their gigs, it started pouring down rain. The roads were barely visible. An eighteen-wheeler crossed that center line."

I covered my mouth as tears fell down my cheeks, knowing what he was about to say. I was horrified by what Golden's grandma had done, but I was happy his mother had found his father. It was so unfair that his mom and dad had found each other only to have a tragedy tear them apart. Then, eighteen years later, Golden lost more of his family in a vehicular accident.

Who said lightning doesn't strike twice?

"Dad died on impact," he continued as he leaned forward and turned the water off.

I had forgotten that we were still sitting in the shower. I felt a whole riot of emotions and tried to figure out the best way to be there

for Golden. I knew it was hard for him to talk about his feelings and to bare himself to me. He was stripping back so many layers, revealing more of what lay beneath.

I understood Golden's need to regroup and pause in his memories. So I stood up and used his washcloth to wipe us both down. I reached out of the shower and grabbed the towels for us. Even though we were in a superior hospital suite, the towels were still thin and rough. I had made sure to grab soft plush ones for his comfort from home.

I handed him his towel and wrapped my own towel around my body. I didn't push him to talk. Instead, I gingerly helped him dry off. Then I grabbed his clothing. I helped him dress and was surprised he didn't fight me. He let me put his boxers, sweatpants, and t-shirt on without a single protest.

I wondered how tired he was. I hoped I hadn't set his recovery back. I felt guilty for giving in so easily.

I slid my matching blush-pink bra and panty set back on, putting on my torn, black skinny-jeans, a thin heather-gray hoodie, black vest, and black knee-high boots. I had wanted a casual "cute" look today. I was feeling better and wanted to *look* better for the guys.

Golden silently took my hand and led me back out into the room. He headed towards the bed, and I understood he wanted to get comfortable and rest.

"The accident induced my mom into labor," Golden quietly continued as he laid down on the hospital bed and pulled me into his side. I laid my head on his chest and tried to be there for him. "I was born six weeks early. The accident had done irreparable damage to my mom's back. She had some slipped disks and all that other *fun* jazz. She got hooked on pain pills. She found an escape from the constant physical pain and ache of losing my dad.

"I don't have many memories of her, but the ones I have aren't the greatest. I suppressed most of those memories. One of my therapists said it was my mind's way of protecting me. Sometimes I'm thankful for it, and other times it frustrates the hell out of me. I remembered the day CPS dropped me off on Grandma's doorstep, though. I thought I had hit the lottery. She lived in a small but

beautiful home. She fed me regularly. She bought me beautiful clothing, game systems, and just spoiled me rotten.

“That lasted for about a month. Then Grandma was introducing me to all my new uncles.”

I closed my eyes as I felt bile rise in my throat. Intuitively, I knew what was coming, and I wanted to scream at the injustice of it all.

“Some of them…” He cleared his throat, and I could tell how much this bothered him to talk about.

“Gold,” I said gently. “You don’t have to tell me.”

My love wasn’t conditional to knowing every little detail about his past. There was no fine print or disclaimers he needed to worry about. I loved him for him.

“I need to,” he said with a decisive nod. “They touched me and made me feel uncomfortable. Luckily, one day in school, we had a guest detective, a woman, come in. They were from some special victims unit, and they talked to us about that stuff. I was six. I knew it made me feel bad when those men would touch me. All my attempts to speak out had been shut down quickly before that day.

“This woman told us how men and women would ask us to keep their secret. She informed us that sometimes these sickos would give us toys and treats to keep our silence. That’s precisely what I had been experiencing. She reassured me that we didn’t have to suffer in silence. We were allowed to go to recess after that, but one by one, they took us into the counselor's office and asked us questions about how we felt about the assembly. The second I could, I blurted out my secret. Those men made me feel dirty, and Grandma would get angry and hit me when I told her I didn't like them touching me or asking me to touch them.”

I felt like I was going to get physically ill. On the other hand, I wished the bitch was alive so that I could kill her myself. I would *never* understand why sick fucks could destroy a child’s innocence in that manner. I never understood how a dog could be put down for biting a child, yet a grown-ass adult with larger mental capacities could harm them irreparably and sometimes get a mere slap on the wrist, if that.

“The detectives got a warrant to search her house,” Golden continued as I gently caressed his chest. He seemed to settle into my touch, and it further confirmed that his “love language” was probably *touch*. “They found physical evidence of the years of abuse my mom had gone through. They found the records on all the money Grandma had made selling her daughter's body. Grandma kept records of every male that used her daughter over the years since she was six years old.

“They found the payments she was beginning to receive from a thirty-six-year-old man who planned to rape me. You see,” he scoffed, barely hiding the sound of disgust and pain, “she barely got anything for letting those others touch me and me touching them, but oral and penetration? That cost more. She was having a bidding war with my virginity. If I hadn’t said anything to that detective that day, my scars would have run deeper,” he admitted darkly. “Because that weekend, she was going to ‘rent’ me out to that man.”

“Golden…” I couldn’t hide the sob that rose from my throat.

“Shh, shh, shh,” he crooned. “Don’t cry for me, darlin’. I don’t need or want your tears. I need to tell you who I am so you understand if you choose to love me, you’ll realize I’m not whole. I’m not sure I’ll ever be. As much as I love you and want to be with you, I still have issues I need to work on.

“Mam and Da sent me to therapy. They recognized where my anger came from. They worked hard to learn how to cope with my issues and find answers that I needed to heal. They were able to find out my dad wasn’t some deadbeat musician that had knocked up my mother and abandoned her, but that he had loved me, loved her. Despite what my grandma told me. They were able to find out that my mom had really tried. She really did, but the demons were too big for her to handle. In therapy, I learned that I had shut out, or repressed, her overdosing and had lived with her dead body for a week before the school realized I hadn’t shown up in days.”

My shoulders shook, and my heart broke for the tragedies he had endured. I wished I could hug six-year-old Golden close and tell him he was loved and deserved to be loved. I wished I could erase every pain inflicted on him.

“They went to my grandmother's parole hearing on my behalf,” Golden sounded surprised and still touched for what Mam and Da had done for him. “The system had already sent her to a prison that might as well have been a country club. They had been lenient on her due to her “advanced” age. She was there for four years before she was eligible for parole. Mam and Da hired the best lawyer out there to ensure her stay there.

“I tell everyone my grandma died, and that’s why I was placed in the foster system. She didn’t die A week after she was denied parole, another younger woman, who truly didn’t belong there, found out the truth about why my grandma was there. She told all the other inmates that I had gotten hurt, that she had been sent there for her negligence. Grandma was in full capacity of her mental health at the time but would act like she was losing her mind. This other woman overheard the charges my grandma was originally booked for, realized she had been acting for years, and a week later, she killed her. Justice was finally served on my behalf.”

I wanted to meet the woman who sought retribution on Golden’s and his mother's behalf and thank her. Some might have thought that was a bloodthirsty notion and had complete faith in the system to work as it was intended. However, I was too pragmatic for that. I trusted the system; I didn’t necessarily trust the *people* in the system. The people in the system were human. Human nature had been proven to fail over the centuries. All it took was a look at our history books to know that truth.

Each person had their own motivation and moral code. Many of them took their jobs and oaths seriously, while others could be swayed by their own biases, beliefs, and other outside factors. Unfortunately, they were the ones continuously failing us, failing people like Golden and me.

Sean should have been locked up a long time ago. Percy, or Pearce Webber, should have been arrested and behind bars. Golden’s grandmother shouldn’t have been eligible for parole for her heinous crimes.

“Lochlann was right,” Golden admitted. “I’m constantly dissecting people, especially those I allow to get the closest. I have this innate need to figure out how they tick, what motivates them. If I

know everything about them and they try to hurt me, I'm ready for it. For them. I am determined to strike before they have the ability to break me more. Can you love someone like me, Peyton? Truly? Am I lovable?" He leaned his head against mine.

I heard the vulnerability and insecurity in his voice. He didn't believe he deserved to be loved. But I was determined to prove to him otherwise.

"You are more than lovable. I love you more today than I loved you yesterday." I sat up so he could see the truth in my eyes. "You were brave and strong to advocate for yourself as a boy. You have always been the defender of the vulnerable. You take care of your siblings as if they are your own flesh and blood. You fought and did everything in your power to ensure they remained in your care. You do a lot for them *and* for others. You're fiercely protective of your pride, my fierce lion, and I'm so lucky to be part of it."

And just like that, I had a new name to give him on my phone. With his golden coloring and the bravery he'd exhibited time and time again, along with such fierce loyalty, he was very reminiscent of a lion.

"I know you blame yourself way too often," I continued to reassure him. "Coach would have still taken me no matter how fast you were. Kyler and Sal chose to follow you; you didn't make them follow you. Yes, you were angry, but you were smart enough not to storm in there, guns blazing. I will always wish you would have stayed home, but for other reasons. I understand why you guys didn't want me to leave the house after my abduction. If I had my way, none of you would ever be hurt again. I love you all, and I can't imagine living my life without you in it. I don't know what the future holds for us, but I know I want you all in it."

"Even me?" Golden asked in a small voice as he searched for the truth in my eyes.

"Even you," I quickly reassured him. "There's a reason fate brought me to you. You may think you're broken, but you're not. Maybe a little bent, like me. I think we all are, but together we make a masterpiece."

He sighed deeply and pulled me in close. I relished the peace and contentment I found in his arms. I was thankful for answered

prayers and the hope for our future. I was grateful I could be lying here with him, even if it was in a hospital. I was so appreciative of another day with them.

Kyler was being moved to another floor today, and the doctors believed his progress was remarkable. Lochlann and Paxton still had to heal from their burns, but they were alive and getting better every day. I had been watching them diligently. I believed it would be no time at all before they were healthy once more. Even amidst all the chaos in our lives, this experience had changed us, surprisingly, for the better.

Our relationships were continually evolving and growing. Zane and I were heading to the city tomorrow and starring in our first music video together. We had leaned on each other a lot the last few days together as we helped the guys and took care of the little ones.

I still felt like a little piece of me−of us−was missing without Crew, but I was starting to believe his absence wasn't a voluntary one but a forced one. While Kyler and Golden had been in ICU, he had visited, according to Bryce. Crew had looked upset but wouldn't talk to Bryce. A part of me hoped he would return to us and explain what was going on in his head. However, I knew I had to take my focus off of him and help the others.

Hopefully, one day we would understand why he made the decisions he did. For now, we had to figure out how to move on without him.

We had gone through experiences that most people never would and were made stronger because of them. We had literally gone through fire together. A few of us would forever carry the scars from it all. Some of us still had a long way to heal from it, and the road was still unknown. I knew one of us would need help navigating the fall-out once the smoke cleared. However, I knew, together, we were stronger, and we would continue rising above anything life threw our way.

Like I had told Golden, we might have been bent, but we weren't broken. While others saw our scars and judged us by our pasts and our experiences, they'd never understand that tough people were made through trials and tribulations. Our life experiences and how we handled them determined if we could

withstand the storms when they came rolling in. I had every confidence that my men and I were more than capable of doing so, especially together.

Author's note

First and foremost, I want to thank all my loyal fans that have been patient with me. 2020 was a doozy of a year for all of us. Unfortunately, my creativity, or lack thereof, is affected by my surroundings and emotions. I had personal and family issues while we all navigated our new “norms.” I had to focus my energy on that.

I am and was blessed with an amazing tribe− you know who you are− and family. I encourage everyone that doesn’t have a tribe to find one. You know who they are when they are silent when you need to speak, tell you hard truths when you want to ignore them, they help you laugh when you want to cry. They never judge you, and most importantly, when crap hits the fan they’re right there by your side.

I’m finding my mojo once more, and the characters are speaking to me again. My book children are ready to be heard, and I hope you will remain by my side.

Thank you again to Jenifer Knox for all you do to guide and help me through my book releases. Thank you for editing my books, connecting me with my fantastic Beta team, and giving me open and honest feedback and suggestions. In addition to promoting my books and doing my covers.

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Thank you to all my loyal readers, my unofficial street team, and giving me “shout-outs” time and time again. I am still in awe and humbled that people actually get as invested in my books as I do.

Finally, I want to thank my husband and two wonderful children for the constant reminders of why I began this endeavor almost four years ago. Writing and reading have always been a hobby of mine, but five, six years ago, I would have never thought I would—or could!—write books people enjoy reading. Or that I would have so many readers avidly waiting to explore the worlds I create.

Thanks again for continuing my journeys with me!

Books By This Author

Gifted Connections Series

Sanctuary Series