ELIZABETH DEAR

A KNIGHT'S REVENGE

THE COMPLETE SERIES



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ELIZABETH DEAR



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Also By Elizabeth Dear
About the Author

This book is dedicated to every reader, reviewer, bookstagrammer and BookTok-er who has picked up this series and shouted about it since it was first released. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for loving Jolie and her boys.

SYNOPSIS

In Saint Gabriel City, there are the Four Families, and there are those who are owned by them.

The Spencers, the Hargraves, the Ferreros, and the Knights rule the City together with their exorbitant wealth and iron fists that no one dare challenge.

Each Family has an Heir, and they are raised together to one day assume control of their respective empires, trained to crush anyone who stands in their way under the heel of their unmeasurable power.

At least, there *were* Four Families, and there *were* four Heirs—until three of the Families banded together to murder the Knights in cold blood one fateful summer night.

Their daughter was only eleven years old.

And the other Heirs—three sons—were only twelve as they watched their best friend die on the floor of a soulless beige conference room next to her parents.

Seven years later, the remaining Heirs have taken their place at the ultra-exclusive Holywell Academy where the City's elite strive to earn a coveted place in the Families' kingdom by rubbing elbows with the exalted sons.

Only what Bennett Spencer, Noah Hargraves, and Zach Ferrero don't know—what the Families have failed to realize after all these years—is that Jolie Knight didn't die that night.

That little girl has been hiding just across the river, right under their noses.

That little girl is all grown up, and now she's the Academy's newest scholarship student.

That little girl is me, and I'm going to burn this City to the motherfucking ground.

This is a New Adult, college-aged dark academy romance. Our heroine will have multiple love interests, and she will not have to choose between them to get to her HEA at the end of the series. As

*always, this series is for the **18+** crowd and contains a whole boatload of foul language, very steamy scenes, and violent themes. If that sounds like your kind of adventure, then come on in.*

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hey there! Thank you for picking up this series. If you're new here and haven't read the individual books before they became this lovely box set, below are just a few notes before we begin to make sure we're all on the same page and the reading experience is the best it can be for you, my Dear reader (get it?).

First, this is a **WhyChoose Romance**. Our leading lady will have three love interests, and she will have a happily ever after with *all* of them at the end of the series. If that's not your thing, no hard feelings. You can check out my Blackstone Academy series instead!

Next, while I would not consider this a true ***dark*** romance, I do want to make sure I cover all possible triggers just in case. If you're familiar with my Blackstone Academy series, this is going to be a bit darker—as in, people are actually going to die in this one.

The series will contain: violent themes, parental death on page, threats of sexual assault (but no actual sexual assault will occur, neither on page nor in the past history of any character), loads of foul language, and (eventually) explicit sex scenes including group sex—but hang on for a bit of a slow burn, y'all.

While those of you that know me are aware that I love to write M/M romance, in this series, our boys will only be with our heroine. (But there is a separate M/M spin-off novella for those of you who are interested!)

Absolutely all sexual situations are consensual, and all participants are over the age of eighteen.

This is a contemporary series (i.e., no paranormal elements), but I still wanted it to have that fantastical feel where the setting is completely fictional and the rules are what those with too much power say they are. *Seriously, y'all*—this has more of the vibe of a comic book or graphic novel than a traditional contemporary romance. Liberties are taken with things like technology, corporate shenanigans, the limits of the human body, and other norms of the real world that do not exist in Saint Gabriel City.

Thank you again for picking up this book and giving it a try.

- Elizabeth

THE MEMORIAL J. KNIGHT EMO PLAYLIST

Available on Spotify

Girl's Not Grey - AFI
Set Phasers to Stun - Taking Back Sunday
The Taste of Ink - The Used
Pretty Girl (The Way) - Sugarcult
A Favor House Atlantic - Coheed & Cambria
What It Is To Burn - Finch
Dancing's Not a Crime - Panic at the Disco
Thks fr th Mmrs - Fall Out Boy
Headfirst Slide Into Cooperstown on a Bad Bet - Fall Out Boy
The Boys of Summer - The Ataris
To the End - My Chemical Romance
Paralyzed - The Used
Top of the World - The All-American Rejects
99 Red Balloons - Goldfinger
The Science of Selling Yourself Short - Less Than Jake
Soundtrack to a Headrush - Emmanuel
Ruthless - Something Corporate
I Woke Up in a Car - Something Corporate
The Artist in the Ambulance - Thrice
Grand Theft Autumn/Where Is Your Boy - Fall Out Boy
Time to Dance - Panic at the Disco
Dear Maria, Count Me In - All Time Low
Give It Up - Midtown

Ohio Is For Lovers - Hawthorn Heights
The Quiet Things No One Ever Knows - Brand New

STORM THE GATES

A KNIGHT'S REVENGE BOOK 1



PROLOGUE

BENNETT - AGE 12



I stood tall in front of my bathroom mirror, practicing my posture and fidgeting with my shiny blue tie. I was no stranger to wearing a suit, but this one—my favorite in dark gray—was almost too small for me since I'd finally had a growth spurt.

I was now almost as tall as my father, and I hoped I'd soon shoot past him so that he couldn't look down at me anymore when he spoke to me.

The boy in my reflection stared back at me, his big green eyes solemn and his nervousness about whatever tonight was about clear on his face. I needed to get myself under control so that Father would see how serious I was about my role in this Family.

I needed him to see how ready I was to take on more responsibility and learn what it meant to be the Spencer Heir.

Father had announced at breakfast this morning that I was to join him tonight for a full formal meeting of the Families—my first time attending rather than being sent off to "play" with the other Heirs while our parents conducted Family business. Father hadn't looked up from his phone even once when he'd given me my marching orders over his usual black coffee and toast, and he hadn't elaborated. I was to be ready at ten o'clock sharp, and we'd be leaving Spencer Tower.

All I could manage was to mumble, “Yes, sir,” after swallowing the mouthful of eggs I’d been chewing when he’d addressed me out of nowhere. I knew better than to ask questions. If he’d wanted me to know more, he’d have told me more.

A sharp knock sounded at my bathroom door.

“Bennett! We’re leaving.”

I tightened my tie one last time, thankful that I’d decided to be ready fifteen minutes early just in case. “Coming!” I called.

Opening the door with a quick tug, I stepped into the dim hallway of our penthouse to find that my father had already disappeared and was probably waiting for me downstairs, impatient as always. I crept down the hall on quiet feet so as not to disturb my mother, even though I doubted a herd of bison could wake her if she’d already taken her pills.

I hurried down several flights of stairs and into the large open foyer of our penthouse, and I found my father waiting in front of the elevator doors, his cold brown eyes scrutinizing my every step as I approached him.

“Stand up straight,” he barked before pushing the button to call the elevator. “Spencers do not slouch or cower in front of *anyone*.”

I made a show of attempting to stand up straighter than I already was, my nerves making me rigid as a board. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Follow along, and do not speak unless spoken to for the rest of the evening. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

After the tense ride down the sixty-five floors of Spencer Tower, we piled into Father’s usual sleek black town car idling at the curb and driven by Rick, the only man allowed to drive him anywhere.

The car moved slowly through the streets of the City, which were quiet this time of night on a Monday, and I immediately recognized the route toward Hargraves Tower—a quick four blocks north of our tower, headed away from the riverfront.

Rick dropped us at the front entrance, and I dutifully followed Father into the elevator. We exited on the twenty-fourth floor, finding ourselves in what looked like an unused office space—newly remodeled and waiting for the next Hargraves company to make its home there, I guessed.

Father ushered me into a large conference room containing nothing but plain beige carpet and several people all dressed for business and standing around the room.

I spotted my best friends, Zach and Noah, right away. I hurried over to where they were leaning up against the bare wall on the far side of the conference room. They had their suits on too, and neither of them looked thrilled to be here.

“Hey,” I whispered as I took up my post next to Zach. “Do you guys know what this is about? Father told me nothing.”

“Nope,” Zach replied, popping the “p.” “Mom sent Ramon to drag me away from my PS4, like, half an hour ago. He shoved me into this stupid monkey suit, and now I’m here, apparently doing real Heir shit.” He yanked on his red tie and ran his hand through his wild black hair, which, apparently, his mother’s bodyguard had not forced him to comb.

“Shh,” I hissed, elbowing him in the ribs. “Don’t let them hear you bitching. This is a big deal. They’re finally going to start treating us like the Heirs if we’re getting to attend a formal Family meeting.”

“I don’t know anything either,” Noah added from Zach’s other side with a quiet sigh. He had his light gray suit on, which still fit him like a glove since he was the last of us to hit a growth spurt.

Well, besides Jolie, but she was a year younger than we were and a girl—so she was supposed to be tiny.

Noah went on. “Dad sat me down earlier and just said that tonight I need to show that I am strong and committed to the Families. That tonight was important.” He shoved his round wire-framed glasses higher on his nose with his finger before tossing the stray strands of his shaggy blond hair out of his face—classic Noah fidgets.

My nerves spiked at his words, but I was determined to prove that I had what it took to be the Spencer Heir, whatever happened tonight. I cast a wary look around the room, but I found nothing that would give me any sort of clue as to what the hell was going on.

My father stood in the center of the room, his features as cold and calculating as they usually were. He wore one of his expensive bespoke suits, and I wondered if he was wearing his guns under his jacket. His brown hair—the same chocolate shade as mine—was only just starting to turn gray at the temples. He’d celebrated his

fortieth birthday a few months ago, and I remembered it well because the four of us had snuck downstairs and stolen two bottles of champagne from his fancy party before getting stupid drunk up in my media room. We'd passed out in a pile of sleeping bags and woken up the next morning feeling like total shit.

Father spoke in hushed tones to Zach's mom, Andrea Ferrero, who listened to him with a scary smile plastered to her Botoxed and heavily made-up face. She wore a sharp pantsuit in blood red, and her spiky black high heels probably cost as much as my mom's car. She was a viper, and all of us were afraid of her, except for Zach, of course, because he was her beloved son.

Noah's dad, Peter, stood next to them, and he appeared to be half listening to whatever my father was saying to Andrea while also keeping a sharp eye on the door. He was the only one of the three of them who looked even a little bit uneasy, though he still managed to stand tall and proud, just like the others. He had ash-blond hair, just a bit different than Noah's golden blond, and his slim-fitting dark blue suit accentuated his skinny frame. He was the least scary of the three of them that were here—choosing mostly to parent Noah politely from a distance rather than exerting the oppressive control Zach and I were used to from our own parents.

"Where's Jolie and her dad?" Noah murmured as the three of us continued to stand there awkwardly. "I guess we're just waiting for them before the meeting starts?"

"If they tried to put her in a dress for this, she probably punched someone," Zach replied, chuckling.

That image had me smiling despite the heavy feeling of the room. As our best friend and the fourth and final Heir, Jolie spent way too much time with the three of us guys, so she was the least girly girl I knew. I hoped she got here soon—I always felt the most at ease when the four of us were together, and I knew the other two felt the same.

Jolie also had the luxury of parents who treated her like a normal kid instead of an unfeeling robot destined to rule an empire, so her dad may have actually told her what the purpose of this whole thing was. She might be able to tell us *something* when she finally got here.

Suddenly, the door to the conference room banged open, and three Enforcers wearing the Ferrero Family serpent crest on their black tactical uniforms marched into the room.

A shrill female voice cried, “Get your hands off my daughter, you pigs!”

I smothered a gasp when I registered that the Enforcers were dragging three people in with them, and they tossed them onto the floor at our parents’ feet before retreating to stand at attention against the nearest wall, their guns now aimed straight at our *prisoners*.

“Oh my God.” Noah’s hushed cry was barely audible, and I felt Zach go rigid beside me.

I sucked in a few more harsh breaths and willed myself to remain still because underneath it all, I was *panicking*.

The struggling, bleeding, bound people now on their knees at James Spencer’s, Andrea Ferrero’s, and Peter Hargraves’ feet were Jeffrey and Kerstin Knight.

The small, unmoving body lying in a heap next to her father, dark red blood staining her white-blonde hair, was Jolie. I could tell she was wearing her favorite Fall Out Boy T-shirt and red polka-dot shorts—the same pajamas she’d worn to so many of our sleepovers in the last year.

They’d taken her from her bed and bashed her freaking head in!

I stared at her, fear like I’d never known seizing my entire body, and I willed her to breathe, move, show some signs of life, but I couldn’t see anything behind her curtain of bloody white hair.

“What the hell is the meaning of this, James?” Mr. Knight spat at my father as he struggled against the zip-ties binding his hands in front of him and his feet behind him. “Are you out of your goddamn mind?”

“Fuck you, Andrea,” Kerstin growled at Zach’s mom through gritted teeth, her own white-blonde hair matted with blood. “Call off your dogs before I stab you to death with those god-awful shoes.”

Andrea just cackled. “Bring it on, bitch. I’m just glad I don’t have to pretend to like you over brunch anymore.”

“Enough!” Father barked like he was bringing this meeting to some kind of order. “That is entirely enough out of you both. I think

you know why you've been brought here before us in this manner."

"I know nothing of the sort," Jeffrey bit out. "There is no reason that exists on this *earth* that would justify what you've done to my family."

My father just plowed on like he hadn't heard Mr. Knight at all. "Everyone in this room understands how the Families work. How we coexist together and how we retain the immeasurable power that we have in this City. It is why we have ingrained it into our code that a betrayal of any of the Families by another is to be dealt with by the harshest of punishments."

A betrayal? What the hell?

"Indeed," Andrea continued. "You two thought you could hide what you were up to from the rest of us. Unfortunately, you thought wrong."

"What in God's name are you talking about?" Jeffrey roared. He tried to reach for Jolie's still form, but Father pulled his gun from under his suit jacket and aimed it straight at Mr. Knight's head, and he froze.

"You really don't know, old friend?" Father asked, his voice dripping with disdain as he cocked his handgun. He leaned in, whispering words that I could only just make out from where I stood paralyzed against the wall. "You were going to *bury* us."

Something must have clicked for Mr. Knight, because the wild outrage and confusion dropped from his face. Instead, a look of cold, bitter fury came over him, and it was as if he'd figured out exactly what was going on after all. "You'll burn in hell for this, you despicable fucking sociopaths," he seethed.

"You first," Father said simply, and then he pulled the trigger.

"No!" Kerstin screamed as her husband's head snapped to the side when the bullet hit him squarely in the temple, and he crumpled to the floor.

"Shit, shit, shit," Zach cursed quietly next to me, his body trembling against mine where our shoulders brushed.

"Oh my God, oh my *God*," Noah moaned again, the pain and fear clear in his shaky whisper.

"You know the code, Kerstin," Andrea purred. "It's over, honey."

Kerstin tore her tear-filled eyes away from where her husband lay, the dark blood seeping from his head into the ugly carpet around him. “Fuck you, you evil bitch. Fuck every single one of you.”

Suddenly, she lunged for Father’s gun, throwing herself in between him and Jolie. He was knocked off balance for a second by her flailing hands, but it only took that one second for Andrea to pull her tiny revolver from her snakeskin purse and fire a shot into Kerstin’s head.

She fell, instantly dead, her body splayed in front of where Jolie still lay completely still.

Was my father going to shoot Jolie too? I sucked in more panicked breaths, desperately trying not to make a sound.

Noah’s dad turned to us, a solemn look on his face like he was disappointed by the evening’s events.

“You did well, boys,” he said to us. “I know this was very hard to watch. Lord knows it was hard for me to hear that Jeffrey—one of my closest and oldest friends—had been so disloyal to us all. But it was important for you three to be here tonight to understand what it means for us to be the Families. We rule *together*, or we don’t rule at all. Any deviation is wiped from the board. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” we all managed to croak in unison.

He gave us a bright smile, and it looked just like Noah’s smile, except Noah could *never* smile at a time like this.

“Yes, excellent work, you three,” Andrea cooed at us. “I know you’ll make me so proud, Zachary.”

He nodded, forcing out a smile for his mom.

“This is the beginning of your real education, boys,” Father added, casting his cold gaze over the three of us. “You’ll learn what it truly takes to be an Heir and one day control your Family’s empire. We expect you to be ready.” Then he turned to the Ferrero Enforcers, who hadn’t moved a single muscle except to lower their weapons now that this horror show was ending. “Get rid of them,” he barked, waving a dismissive hand at the Knights before turning away to confer with Peter and Andrea.

Zach, Noah, and I watched as the Enforcers dragged the dead bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Knight from the room. The last one hefted Jolie over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, her head dangling

and her pale face turned toward where we stood like statues, and then he marched obediently behind the others toward the exit.

The last thing I saw before they disappeared was the fluttering open of Jolie's eyes, her striking aquamarine stare meeting mine for a fraction of a second and boring straight into my *soul*, before her lids fell shut again as she vanished out the door and out of our lives forever.

CHAPTER ONE

JOLIE - PRESENT DAY



The sun was just rising over the dark waters of the Obsidian River as I made my way through the familiar streets of Olde Town toward the Boathouse. It was already muggy though it wasn't even six in the morning yet, the swampy heat of the late Mid-Atlantic summer lingering and doing nothing to improve my sour mood.

I sighed in annoyance at the trickle of sweat that dripped between my boobs, my black sports bra growing damp as I ambled along the old cobblestone streets. I passed by the blocks of colorful eighteenth-century homes, the ancient rowhouses a stark contrast to the expensive, modern cars smashed together along their curbs at weird angles because the rich were apparently much worse at parallel parking than those of us living on the Southside.

As my twenty-minute stroll came to an end, I reached the Boathouse—a two-story wooden monstrosity built on a pier on the banks of the Obsidian where it bordered Olde Town to the east. Its sloping roof jutted out several feet on either side of the building, creating a tall covered walkway along the sides of the pier. The navy-blue doors were open even though it was hot as shit out here, and its large, white-framed windows beamed in as much of the morning light as possible—which was good, since Bruce was a cheap ass who

didn’t turn the lights on as long as he could see six inches in front of his face.

“Hey, Bruce,” I called as I breezed through the front doors.

He was in his usual spot at the front desk, bent over a newspaper like a senior citizen, his long gray hair pulled into a haphazard ponytail and his reading glasses on his head instead of his face where they would actually do something for him.

“Hey, Jojo,” he replied, not taking his eyes off his crossword or whatever he was engrossed in. “Need you back by seven. I’ve got a middle-school crew starting at seven-thirty.”

“Got it,” I replied as I ducked into the hallway to commandeer a spare locker. I shoved my ratty backpack inside, hanging onto the earbuds that were already in my ears and my phone that I slid into the pocket of my rowing trou.

I headed for the back door, intent on grabbing my favorite scull from the rack at the dock, when Bruce called out to me again. “So, you’re really leaving tomorrow?”

I paused, turning to find him frowning at me. His soft blue eyes were full of worry, and while I appreciated the fact that he was among the very small number of people on the planet that truly cared about me, I didn’t need this shit right now.

The *doubt*.

“Yes,” I replied, my tone firm as I met his blue eyes with mine—violet today with my current choice of colored contact lenses. “Max is helping me move into the Academy dorms tomorrow. I start classes on Monday.”

He sighed, picking up on my prickliness without fail. Bruce had known me since I washed up onto his doorstep like a drowned rat when I was eleven, and I’d been working for him since I was fourteen. “I know this is what you need to do, Jojo. I wouldn’t have given your name to the crew coach up there for the scholarship if I didn’t have faith in your mission. I just…. I hope you’re being careful, that’s all.”

“Of course I am,” I said, deadly serious. “I’ve had years to prepare, Bruce. I am not going to fuck this up.”

“Right. I believe you. I’ll just…. I’ll miss having you around here, though, you know? I’m getting too old to scrub the boats like you do.”

I forced a laugh, ready to lighten the mood. “It’s not like I’m going far. It’s a ten-minute train ride into the City. And I’ll be here during winter break to use your ergs, obviously. Lord knows Dom still won’t let me try to fit one in our apartment.”

He chuckled. “Leave your uncle alone. He loves that little apartment.”

I loved it too, and I would miss it as much as my fucked-up heart could miss a thing in this world.

“Okay, I’m out,” I said, turning back to the door. “I’ll have my scull back before seven.”

“Or when you’re good and ready,” I heard him mutter.



Ten minutes later, I was where I felt the most centered—rowing alone in the middle of the miles-wide swath of the Obsidian River.

It had taken years of work for me to be able to relax out here, but Dom and Bruce pushed me to conquer my fear of the river as a part of working through my trauma. So, Bruce taught me to row, and I’d worked myself to the bone to *own* this fucking water. I’d gotten so good at it that it became my ticket into the nation’s most exclusive college.

Holywell Academy.

It was also going to be my ticket into ferreting my way into the dark corners where the Families kept all their secrets.

I could just make out the Academy from my spot out on the river as I rowed east, heading away from the Boathouse. The stone turrets of the main academic building and the highest floors of the largest dorm were just visible above the lush green trees and brick walls that obscured the rest of the campus from view. It sat atop a hill just to the west of the thriving metropolis of Saint Gabriel City, and it was where anyone who was anyone or ever hoped to be anyone in this hellhole attended school—assuming their family could buy their way in.

Or if you were like me, and you were able to land one of its few coveted scholarships.

Reach, pull, reach, pull.

I turned my scull south and began to pull harder. I was now staring straight at the opulence that was the City itself as I rowed upstream. The City center sat on an enormous peninsula of sorts, with the wide stretch of the Obsidian forking into a Y shape around its borders, its multitude of shiny modern skyscrapers glittering in the morning light.

The skyline was like Manhattan on steroids, and the worst offenders were the four towers belonging to the Four Families. They loomed over the rest—a fitting position for the homes of the people who had ruled the City for generations.

The top of each tower housed the penthouse and living quarters for the members of the Family. Underneath them were the various business enterprises the Family owned and deemed important enough to be housed in its tower. Other Family businesses were spread around the City.

Beneath the Four Families in the City's rigid hierarchical strata were the bevy of its very richest citizens—what we called "Tier One" families—their extreme wealth and business successes dependent on keeping favor with the Families and with each other. Their money flowed downward to the rich-but-not-Tier-One-rich (called, you guessed it, "Tier Two") families. These people and their vast network of businesses made their homes in other lavish buildings around the City and in its wealthier suburbs.

The City was considered the largest concentration of wealth in the western hemisphere. Even the newest Tier Two families were worth seven or eight figures—achieved only with the blessing and the influence of the Families, of course.

I ran my violet gaze over Spencer Tower, a shiny blueish-silver skyscraper topped with an asymmetrical triangle sporting the Spencer's trident crest that sat front and center of the City skyline, just a block off the riverbank. Spencer was the white-collar empire, controlling the banks, hedge funds, investment brokers, credit companies, and the largest law firm in the City—with James Spencer, Esquire as managing partner.

What the public at large did not know about the Spencer Family was its many less-than-legal activities. We suspected their

involvement in all manner of things like fraud, money laundering, gambling, and insider trading.

The black-paned Ferrero Tower was located a few blocks north of Spencer Tower, easily identified by the open square structure on its roof that glowed red at night. Ferrero controlled the entertainment industry—bars, hotels, restaurants, concert venues, and clubs of all kinds.

The Ferrero's *other* enterprises were lesser known, involving—that we knew of—illegal fights, weapons trafficking, and procuring all kinds of stolen shit for rich buyers, like priceless artifacts that belonged in a museum.

A few blocks further north of Ferrero was Hargraves Tower, a cool gray structure that was designed to look like it was always leaning to the left. The Hargraves empire was in healthcare—hospitals, insurance companies, medical tech, wellness centers, even gyms. You couldn't spend a dollar on a Band-Aid in the City without eighty cents going into a Hargraves pocket.

And of course, because one didn't maintain the wealth and power of one of the Four Families without a lucrative criminal side gig, Hargraves appeared to have its hands in the drug trade. Prescription pills, coke, heroine, you name it—if it was sold or consumed in this City, Hargraves profited.

Reach, pull, reach, pull.

I sucked in a breath, finally daring a glance at what was still being called Knight Tower. It sat on the City's eastern shore, its white panes creating a sleek, simple design. My dad's business—the Knight empire—was technology. On the West Coast, there was Silicon Valley. On the East Coast, there was Knight.

Knight owned or had a stake in dozens of booming tech companies—computers, phones, software, apps, even electric cars. It was generally understood that Knight still operated as it had before my family's "tragic demise in a plane crash while on vacation in the Bahamas," but now the Knight empire had been split between Spencer, Ferrero, and Hargraves—the spoils of a war my dad apparently hadn't known he was fighting until it was too late.

I felt my blood boil as I stared at the beautiful building that had once been my home, then I sucked in a deep breath and let the

familiar numbness consume me—an exercise I'd perfected after seven years.

Reach, pull, reach, pull.

I was now sweating profusely as the sun rose higher in the sky and roasted my exposed skin. My loose white tank top stuck to my back, and I regretted not tying my long hair, currently dyed so dark brown that it almost looked black, into a bun instead of a ponytail, as it was now sticking to my sweaty neck.

The song blaring through my earbuds transitioned to "The Artist in the Ambulance" by Thrice, and I ignored the twinge of pain I felt every time one of my favorite old emo songs hit my ears.

My dad had loved this stuff, and I had so many memories of us rocking out together in our living room when I was a little kid, or of him tinkering with whatever computer or tech thing he was working on while his Warped Tour playlist was blasting on repeat in his office.

I kept him alive with my own playlists, and now even Max was a convert.

Reach, pull.

I finally turned my scull around, giving the City my back like it deserved, and I began to pull toward the Boathouse. I rowed west, the river's eastern border now in my line of sight. To the east there was only a sprawling semi-vacant no-man's-land of dilapidated warehouses and shipping containers that we all referred to as Industrial City—even though calling it a "city" was a bit of a stretch. It was the only blight on the otherwise perfect City aesthetic that surrounded the Y shape of the Obsidian. The trains didn't even run over there, though Max and I had once taken a kayak all the way across the wide river to get a closer look at it.

Bruce had bitched at us later, but it hadn't been very exciting, so we never did go back.

As I headed home, I was once again reminded that "home" was a place the City would never again be for me. I hadn't been back since that night.

And I couldn't wait to watch it all burn.

CHAPTER TWO



I returned my boat to Bruce with two minutes to spare, and he just gave me a knowing stare and a nod as I hustled out the front door, which I suspected was the only goodbye I was going to get from him.

As “Girl’s Not Grey” by AFI hit my ears, I made my way down to Main Street, taking in the Saturday morning hustle and bustle as shop and restaurant owners readied their storefronts for a busy day.

Main Street ran east to west and divided Olde Town, a historic suburb of the City that lay on the western border of the river, into the Northside and the Southside. Northside was where the wealthy, Family-connected residents lived who desired Olde Town’s quaint feel and quieter pace of life. Old colonial rowhouses had been renovated into million-dollar homes. Fancy modern townhouses filled in the gaps. Pristine parks, expensive restaurants, and gourmet coffee shops and grocery stores lined the streets.

The Southside was much, much larger, extending from neighborhoods of smaller but well-maintained historic homes that made up the area just south of Main into a sprawl of blocks and blocks of drab mid-century houses with rusting fences and overgrown lawns alongside aging apartment buildings and crowded public housing. Strip malls popped up along the main roads, and the dining options were mostly fast food or the occasional shabby-but-delicious mom-and-pop restaurant.

The majority of the City's working class lived here, many taking the train into the City daily to toil within the Family empires, while others stayed closer to home—all of them trying to make ends meet in whatever way they could before the City's ruling class sucked them dry.

Main Street itself was where we could get a glimpse of the City's rare middle-class citizen. There were even some small-business owners here who were, by some miracle, making a decent living with no connection to or investment from anyone Family related.

Like my uncle, Dom.

I turned south and walked the last two blocks to my family's bookstore. The happy turquoise brickwork greeted me, and I waved to my aunt, Laura, where she was seated in the large corner window, setting up the fall-release display. I ducked into the back alley behind the store and let myself into our private entrance, making my way up the narrow flight of stairs that led to our small two-bedroom apartment on the store's second floor.

"Hey, honey," Dom said as I joined him in our small kitchen. He was wearing his black training shorts and matching T-shirt sporting the tiger logo of the MMA gym he owned, and he was bent over the stove, carefully folding an omelet. "Have a good morning workout?"

"I did," I replied, taking a seat at one of the barstools. "Bruce gave me his worried face but didn't hassle me too much when he said goodbye."

Dom slid his perfect omelet onto a plate, and then he turned to look at me with his "concerned dad" face. "Bruce feels responsible for you—almost as much as Laura and I do. Cut him some slack. What you're doing—what *we're* doing—it's very risky."

"And very fucking important," I added, not that he needed convincing. Dom was my biggest champion. He knew the stakes, but he also had confidence that I had what it would take.

"What's very fucking important?" Max mumbled as he trudged into the kitchen, all sleep rumpled and lazy.

"Oh, I don't know, Max, the little project that your sister is about to undertake that's intended to cause the destruction of the all-powerful Families of Saint Gabriel City?" Dom snarked at his son.

Max just nodded as he grabbed a box of Cheerios. “Well, yeah. It’s gonna be fucking awesome.” He wandered into the living room, stopping on his way to drop a kiss on the top of my head, and then he threw himself onto the worn leather sofa and began eating cereal straight from the box.

Dom rolled his dark brown eyes in Max’s direction before bringing them back to me, where they softened with deep affection before he said, “Maybe I’m just not ready for you to go off to college, regardless of the circumstances.”

“You old softie,” I teased. “The Academy is, like, five miles from here. And I have a feeling I’ll be seeing you anyway.”

He chuckled. “I suspect you’re right.”

I smiled, full of the affection I felt for my uncle-slash-adoptive father, because I would miss him too. It was a real miracle that he, Laura, and Max had somehow been able to put my heart back together just enough that I could feel love again.

Whatever asshole god that had *not* been watching over my mom and dad that night seven years ago had apparently decided to cut eleven-year-old me a break, miraculously delivering me to Dom instead of letting me drown in the murky black depths of the Obsidian.

My memories of that night were hazy—a brutal head wound will do that to a little kid—but I did remember that I had been unlucky enough to have regained consciousness just in time to listen to the people I’d thought were my parents’ closest friends and allies murder them in cold blood. I’d frozen in shock and terror, deciding to continue to play dead, and then I’d learned that those psychopaths had committed murder in front of three twelve-year-old boys to teach them a lesson.

And I still didn’t know *why*.

But I was sure the fuck going to find out.

Fortunately for me, it seemed that even the sociopathic heads of the Families didn’t have it in them to kill a kid with their own hands, because I’d made it out of that room still alive—barely. I had vague memories of two Enforcers arguing over who was going to have to do the honors as they drove one of their armored Jeeps along the riverbank with my “unconscious” body tossed in the back seat.

Something had come over me—a moment where the will to live won out over the crushing despair of losing my parents in the worst way imaginable—and I'd bolted from the Jeep and jumped straight over the guardrail into the river.

I'd stayed submerged for as long as I could manage, and I remembered feeling disoriented and undecided about whether I shouldn't just let myself drown. They must have assumed I did drown because when I finally floated up under a dock, there had been no sign of the Enforcers or the Jeep.

And then I swam. I was a good swimmer since my rich parents had put me in lessons with the other Heirs as soon as I could walk, but I'd had my goddamn head bashed in, so I wasn't exactly in top form. I didn't know how it happened, but Bruce told me he found me clinging to a piece of driftwood on the riverbank next to his dock when he came to open the Boathouse at five in the morning. I apparently had no sense of self-preservation left, so I'd blurted the whole horrific story to him as he wrapped me in a towel and carried my shivering little body inside.

Instead of turning me over to the Families for what would have probably been a substantial payout to keep quiet, he'd called his friend Dominic Miller—recently retired from the military's Special Forces and who, Bruce knew, had no love lost for the Families.

It was then, and still was today, a strict policy of the Families to keep images of the Heirs out of the media except under very tightly controlled circumstances, but Dom and Bruce had no doubts that I was who I claimed to be. My aquamarine eye color and white-blonde hair looked just like my mother's, and she had been among the most recognizable faces in the City.

My memories were spotty after Bruce pulled me from the water, but at some point, I'd woken up snug in a twin bed in a tiny bedroom with stitches in my head and a ten-year-old boy dozing in a sleeping bag on the floor next to me. When he woke up a short time later, he happily informed me that he was going to be my brother and that I could have his bed for as long as I needed to feel better.

We still slept in bunk beds in that tiny room, and I loved it.

"Jojoooo," Max whined from where he was sprawled on the couch, pulling me from my trip down memory lane. "I have a

headache."

I'd finished the eggs Dom had whipped up for me, so I joined Max on the couch, settling his head on my lap and running my fingers through his silky black hair. He usually kept it in a messy bun on the back of his head, but I suspected he'd known he was going to whine at me for a head massage when he woke up hung-the-fuck-over and had planned accordingly.

"You're pathetic," I told him. "You're lucky I'm feeling mushy about how much I'm going to miss you, or else I wouldn't be rewarding your reckless behavior."

"I wasn't reckless," he grumbled. "I was high off my win last night, so the guys and I had to celebrate."

"Maybe celebrate about half as much next time!" Dom called from the kitchen.

"Whatever! Don't act like you're not proud!" Max shouted back.

Dom grinned, and I rolled my eyes. Friday Fight Nights at Dom's gym were legendary on the Southside, and Max was among the best in the under-twenty-one group.

I was no slouch, either, but I'd been busy of late and hadn't made a Fight Night in a while.

Dom was exceedingly proud of both of us, and he bragged to anyone who would listen about his son's and his niece's prowess in the cage.

To the outside world, I was Dom's niece by marriage, and Max was my cousin. Dom and Max both favored Dom's Korean mother with their striking dark looks, but we were fortunate that Laura was very Caucasian—a honey-blonde, blue-eyed Midwestern beauty. It was easy to sell my arrival and their subsequent adoption of me after Laura's "sister" perished in a car crash, leaving behind a daughter.

Dom's connections in the Shadows—an organization that the Families would have destroyed long ago had they gotten even a whiff of its existence—whipped up a fake identity for me, and I had been Joanna Miller for seven long years. A niece on paper, but now a daughter and a sister in their hearts.

If it hadn't been for them, I'd still be the traumatized shell of a human I'd been when Bruce found me.

I might even be dead.

Max shifted in my lap, looking up at me with the same dark eyes his father had. “Still rocking the purple, eh? Is that the color scheme we’re going with or are you going to change it up before we move you in tomorrow?”

“It’s *violet*, and yeah, I think I’m going to keep this look,” I replied. “I’ve got too much other shit going on for me to fuck around, changing things. I’m fully stocked up on contact lenses and hair dye for at least the next year.”

Seven years ago, Dom had sat on the end of Max’s bed where I’d been sleeping on and off for days and gently explained to me that I was going to have to work very carefully and meticulously to keep my identity a secret because we had no idea if the Families truly believed I was dead.

The public certainly thought I was after James Spencer had held the world’s fakest sad press conference on the steps of Knight Tower, announcing my family’s death in a plane crash while on our summer vacation.

I’d managed to listen to James speak for about two minutes before I’d run to the bathroom to puke my guts out.

We later found out that they’d actually crashed a real plane to stage the accident, though we never were able to figure out which poor souls’ bodies they’d burned to a crisp in the wreckage.

So, in order to maintain the ruse that I’d died with my parents, I’d learned to conceal my distinctive features by wearing contacts to hide my eye color. I’d had brown eyes for years until I got bored and started a more exciting rotation. I also dyed my hair any color that wasn’t blonde—usually some shade of brown, though I spent a few years as a redhead before I’d decided I’d had enough “does the rug match the drapes” jokes from disgusting teenage boys and went back to brown. It was also good luck that I’d gotten the tall gene from my dad and was now five foot nine, so I was no longer the tiny girl I was when I “died.”

According to our intel, no one suspected a thing, and there hadn’t been even a hint of an off-the-books search for Jolie Knight since that night.

Max smirked at me. “I, for one, just hope someone else decides to call you a purple-eyed freak in the cage again. You’re vicious

when you’re pissed off.”

I laughed. It wouldn’t be long before the entire City found out how true that was.

HOLYWELL ACADEMY
WELCOME LETTER

Dear Miss Miller,

Congratulations on your acceptance to the most exclusive collegiate academy in the nation. Holywell Academy has produced some of the City's most successful leaders and innovators. The Academy will offer you the tools for success, and we expect you to respect and value the opportunity afforded to you by your admission to this prestigious institution.

We expect our students to keep a minimum grade point average of 3.0 and to attend at least 12.0 credit hours per semester. There are a number of core required classes tailored to the specialized education of our City's future leaders.

All students must live on campus in the student housing assigned in accordance with the Academy's guidelines and the alumni status of the student's family.

You are adults, and we will treat you as such, so there is no school uniform. However, we strongly encourage professional dress, as you are preparing for your future as leaders of this City and networking with your peers and potential future colleagues.

The Academy strives to prepare you not just academically, but with real-world scenarios as well. Students are encouraged to work out conflicts amongst themselves in a fair and just manner without interference from the Academy's faculty or staff.

Please be advised that failure to adhere to the Academy's codes of conduct will result in expulsion. Remember, there can be no path to true success in Saint Gabriel City without a Holywell education.

Yours sincerely,
Dean Amara Jansen

CHAPTER THREE



"Honey, you're still sure about this? It's not too late to change your mind."

Laura flitted around the bookstore—her baby, left to her by her grandmother and mercifully free and clear of any Family connection—and she was obviously trying to keep herself busy so that she didn't have to think about the fact that I was leaving. Max and I had stopped in downstairs to tell her goodbye, and I appreciated how hard she was trying to act like she wasn't moping.

"Mom, chill," Max drawled from where he was perched on top of an empty display table, his long legs dangling. "Dad's trained her for this for, like, the entire time she's been with us. Have some faith."

"I know that," Laura replied, heaving a big sigh. "I just…. I wish there was another way."

There wasn't. "The Academy is my way in, Laura," I said. "There's no good way to get close to any of the heads of the Families, but we know that the Heirs are basically left alone within the walls of the school. It's my only shot at getting what I need."

She frowned. "And you're sure those boys aren't going to recognize you? You were so close with them for most of your life."

"They won't," I said, as sure of that as I was of anything.

And I'd be shocked if I really recognized *them*, either, after what their parents would have molded them into since that night. The feelings associated with the bond we'd once shared were such a

distant memory now, like a pleasant dream I'd once had that morphed into a nightmare.

I didn't have close friends anymore. I had Max. I had my aunt and uncle. I sort of had Bruce when he wasn't being an ornery shit.

I didn't need anything else.

"I'll be checking in a lot," I added, trying to reassure her. "And then when this is all over, we're going to take my inheritance and disappear to an island to do nothing but lie on the beach and drink Mai Tais for the rest of our days."

"Fuck yeah," Max chirped.

She finally cracked a smile, then she threw her arms around me, squeezing tight. "I can't wait. Just come home soon, okay?"

"I will," I said as I hugged her back, even though I wasn't sure I would.

Once I was in, nothing was going to pull my focus from my plans.



"I can't believe you didn't want to have one last hurrah with everyone at the gym last night," Max griped at me.

We sat on the train, each of us with a large duffle bag containing my paltry belongings shoved onto the seat next to us, and we'd just begun the ride toward the Northside. After a few stops, we'd travel over the bridge and into the City.

"Again, it's not like I won't be back," I retorted. "I'm sure I'll hop back in the cage over the holidays—you know, dust the cobwebs off."

"Everyone was asking about you. *Especially* Jennings." He waggled his eyebrows at me, like a dick.

"Ugh, no thank you. He'll get ideas."

Max cackled, always reveling in the "trail of broken hearts" he claimed I left among the guys at Dom's gym. It was ridiculous, because that "trail" was, like, two guys, seeing as my options were pretty limited if I didn't want Max's sloppy seconds—which I did not. Max did not discriminate as to the gender of the person he hooked

up with, and he'd been the one breaking hearts in that gym and at school since he hit puberty.

It seemed to me that we'd had an above-average number of bi-awakenings amongst all the gym bros that frequented Dom's, but what did I know?

Max tossed a muscled arm over my shoulder. "I'll let him down gently next time I see him."

"Maybe you should see if his one lackluster night with me left him with an interest in dick," I retorted, elbowing him in the ribs.

"I would, but he's such a lost little puppy about you. A cute one, though."

I sighed. Relationships did not interest me. There wasn't enough space in my head or my fractured heart for anyone who wasn't my family. Plus, there was the whole thing about how I was *in hiding*. Getting close to someone new was never worth the risk.

"Yeah, but—" I froze, a familiar voice drawing my attention to the small flat-screen TVs mounted along the walls of the sleek train cars, set permanently on the local news station unless they were announcing a stop.

"The Knight industries are b-booming, of course," the man behind the podium stammered, trying to put on a confident smile. "We are so fortunate to have continued to grow even after the tragedy that took my family from us. It wouldn't have been possible without the help… without the guidance and support of the remaining Families. I expect our third quarter to be our best yet."

The man took a few softball questions from the press before hurrying from the stage.

"He's looking thinner," Max remarked. "And a hell of a lot older than thirty-five."

"Yep," I murmured, falling into the daze that always overcame me when I was faced with what was left of my family. "I doubt he can take a shit without James Spencer breathing down his neck. I hope they at least let him have a Xanax prescription."

The man was my uncle—my real uncle—Anders Nilsson. He was my mom's much younger brother, and while I hadn't known him well, I had some fleeting memories of him, all youthful and goofy, blowing through our penthouse every once in a while before traipsing off on

whatever adventure he was having. Sometimes he'd brought me a present from his travels when he visited.

It had been his very unfortunate luck that he'd decided to settle down for a while and get a "real job" with Knight a few months before my parents were murdered and our Family empire stolen. My dad had only just brought Anders onto his personal team to train him, so instead of gallivanting around the globe when everything went to shit, he was trapped here.

For seven years, he'd been the shaky figurehead of Knight, slowly unraveling before our eyes while he was used to add a kernel of legitimacy to the fiction that there were still four distinct empires—though he could never be head of the Family because he was not a Knight. He was just a puppet whose strings were pulled by James Spencer, Andrea Ferrero, and Peter Hargraves.

I was sad for him, my only living blood relative, but it would've been far too risky to ever reach out to him to let him know I was alive. He was under the thumb of the Families now.

As the train pulled into its last stop before we'd cross the bridge, I found myself absently rubbing at the charm I wore on a long chain around my neck, usually safely hidden between my boobs. It was a rose gold cherry blossom that my dad had given me as a late birthday present only a few months before he died and the only possession I had from my old life since Dom had burned the blood-soaked clothes I'd crossed the river in.

I'd almost left it locked in a little safe I kept under my bunk, but I decided it would be best to take it with me, keeping it close to my heart as a reminder of *why* I was at the Academy in the first place.

"It's time, Mom and Dad," I whispered.

Max hugged me tighter.



We changed trains in the City center, hopping onto the direct line to the Academy. I was thankful the trains went underground in the City proper so I didn't have to exit the station under the shadow of fucking Spencer Tower even for a second, instead reemerging into the light

of day a block from the front gate of Holywell Academy on the far west side of the City.

“Damn,” Max said with a low whistle as we approached the gate. “We are not in Southside anymore, Dorothy.”

“Hey,” I huffed, elbowing him. “Act like you’ve been places.”

I’d certainly been places, at least in my previous life, but even I had to stand at the wrought iron gate and gawk for a minute as I took in Holywell Academy.

A redbrick sidewalk lined with stately trees led to the main academic building, creatively named Holywell Hall, since the entire school had once been housed there back when it was built in 1897. It was as long as a football field and five stories tall, made of old gray stones and flanked by turrets that jutted even a few stories higher. Arched windowpanes dotted every floor, and there were honest-to-God gargoyles perched along the roof.

I could see the cluster of more modern dorm buildings off to the left of Holywell Hall, and to the right was the gothic cathedral that now housed the library. Somewhere beyond the main campus were the athletic facilities, and the Academy’s boathouse would be located along its western border by the riverfront.

“Name?” The bored gate guard held out his hand, barely looking at either of us.

I handed him the Academy ID that had arrived in the mail last week. “Joanna Miller. My cousin, Max Miller, should be on the list to escort me in.”

He scrolled unhurriedly on his sleek black tablet, the white horse logo of Knight peeking out from behind his gloved hand, then he droned, “You’re in C Dorm, room 302. Your ID will be activated to allow you access through any of the campus gates, the Academy buildings, and your dorm room. Your school tablet will be in your room. Please review the welcome packet before classes begin tomorrow.”

“Download successful,” Max chirped at him.

He gave us a droll look before pressing a button somewhere inside his little guard hut, and the gate began to slowly swing open, its hinges creaking loudly.

We made our way down the long sidewalk and then around the left side of Holywell Hall toward the west side of campus where the dorms were located. There were a few people out and about, most of them looking like bright-eyed freshman wandering the grounds with their impeccably dressed parents, but otherwise it was a quiet Sunday at the Academy.

We passed A Dorm—the largest and most upscale of the available student housing and made up of the kind of pricey condos that could be found in any of the luxury residential towers the City offered. This was where the Tier One students would live, and rumor had it that the top floor had been remodeled prior to last year so that the Heirs themselves could have a huge penthouse to live in during their four years here.

B Dorm was slightly smaller and a little older, but it still had that historic college charm to it. This was where the Tier Two students would end up, as well as any wealthy outsiders whose parents sent them to the Academy to rub elbows with the fabled Families of Saint Gabriel City. I suspected the sons and daughters of other important players within the Families, such as Head Enforcers or Private Secretaries, might land in B Dorm as well.

Finally, we arrived at C Dorm sitting at the back of the triangle of dorms and furthest from the main campus buildings, where the scholarship students and anyone else who couldn't pony up for the better dorms would be living.

"They don't even try to act like there isn't a caste system around here, do they?" Max groused as he eyed the simple white brick building. "Five bucks says there's not even an elevator in this one."

"It's like you forgot we're still in the City," I replied as I pressed my ID to the scanner next to the heavy black door. "Of course there's a caste system."

The lock disengaged with a loud snap, and we made our way inside. A small lobby, clean but simple, led to an ancient front desk that was currently unmanned. The stairs (Max was right) were easy enough to find just beyond the desk, and after hauling my duffel up three flights to the top floor, I buzzed us into room 302.

"This is…," Max began, eyes bouncing around the room.

"Great," I finished for him. Because it was.

There was a queen bed (a *queen* bed!), a wooden desk with plenty of drawer space and a chair, and a matching dresser—and the open closet door told me there was enough room in there to actually walk into it. The dark hardwood floor was covered by a simple cream-colored rug. There was even an en suite bathroom.

Best of all, my room faced southwest, so I had a view of the river, and I could even see Olde Town—Northside, but still. I wouldn't have to go to bed at night and wake up every morning staring at the Family Towers and the City skyline.

We set about unpacking me, and within an hour, I had the bed made, my clothes put away, and my bathroom stocked. Max lounged on my bed, snooping through the tablet that had been ready and waiting for me on my desk.

"Have you read this brochure?" he asked as I rummaged in my closet. "It's bonkers."

"Yep," I replied. "This place is dedicated first and foremost to churning out Family bootlickers. It's not going to be the typical college experience."

"I don't think you've packed correctly for the dress code, either."

I poked my head out of the closet to give him an amused grin. "I know."

"Dad told you to blend in."

"Don't worry about m—"

A knock sounded at the door.

He arched a questioning eyebrow at me, and I just shrugged. I didn't know a soul in this place, but it was probably one of my neighbors just trying to be friendly.

I motioned at Max to be ready, just in case. He sat up, rolling to the edge of the bed and pulling his knife from his boot in one smooth motion.

I opened the door to find a girl standing there with a tentative smile on her face. She stood at about my height, though I realized quickly that she was wearing designer sneakers with a tall wedge heel that added a few inches. Her pleated pink skirt fell to mid-thigh and her silky white blouse draped artfully across her curves. She had flawless brown skin and long dark curls, styled perfectly like she was going out on the town instead of moving into her dorm room.

“Hi,” she said brightly. “I’m across the hall in 301. I just wanted to come say hello.”

She seemed genuine and completely lacking in bad vibes, so I motioned her into the room.

“Joanna Miller,” I said, holding out a hand. “Freshman, here on scholarship for crew.”

Her light brown eyes took me in with interest, probably noting my weird eye color, cheap denim cutoff shorts, worn gym T-shirt, and bare feet. “I’m Mari Anzaldua. Sophomore.”

“Anzaldua?” I blurted. “What the fuck are you doing in C Dorm?”

The Anzalduas were a Tier One family that owned several luxury hotel chains. They were linked to Ferrero with Andrea being a minority shareholder, but they ran the business and pocketed the majority of the profits as all Tier One families were able to do.

She sighed, rolling her eyes. “I know. I’m being punished by my parents. They’re unhappy with the fact that I refuse to break up with my girlfriend. I met her when I was at boarding school in Madrid. We’re long distance, but I’m pretty vocal about it on my Instagram.”

“Oh,” I replied, confused. “Why do they care?”

Of all the evil wrought by the institution of the Four Families, homophobia was not actually on the list. Some of the City’s most well-known, wealthiest citizens were queer.

She trotted over to my bed and flopped dramatically down on the mattress, paying no mind to Max still sitting there, staring at her in amusement and twirling his knife through his fingers. “They’re old school enough that they want me to produce an heir through a traditional marriage, even though I’m a lesbian. They don’t care if I see women on the side if I’ll just agree to that.” She narrowed her eyes. “I won’t.”

“Good for you,” Max said, spinning to sit cross legged on the bed while he looked down at her with a sly grin. “But if you change your mind, I’m available.”

“Max!” I snapped. “What part of *lesbian* didn’t you get? Behave yourself.”

Mari was unperturbed, sliding her eyes over to Max like she was just noticing he was there, and I watched as she took in his angular cheekbones, his perfect skin, his thick raven locks that his Korean

heritage had blessed him with tied in his artfully messy man bun, and his white V-neck T-shirt that was so tight that I'd teased him this morning about staying out of my dresser.

"Oh, you are very pretty," she told him, and he preened at that. "But the dick situation is disqualifying, *lo siento*."

"Mari, this is my cousin, Max," I said, leaning my butt up against my desk and crossing my arms to give Max another warning glare. "He's extremely pansexual and a hopeless flirt. Please excuse him."

Max winked at her one last time before he got to his feet. "I've got to get back home anyway. I hope you both keep me in your thoughts and prayers while I am trapped in one last year of high school on the Southside."

Mari wrinkled her nose. "You guys are from the Southside? Is that why you have a knife? You don't need that here, you know. The safest place in the whole City is inside the walls of the Academy, especially while the Heirs are here."

I doubted that and so did Max. He met my eyes and gave me a quick nod, and I knew what he was going to be getting up to when he left my room.

He tossed his arms around me, and I squeezed him back. "I'll be checking in with you later," he whispered in my ear. "Be good. Love you."

"Love you too," I whispered back.

"Nice to meet you, Mari!" he called to her as he sauntered out the door, heading out with his exact replica of my Academy ID and its now activated barcode to case as much of the Academy as he could get away with before hopping the train back home.

I turned back to Mari, finding that it didn't chafe me as much as it normally would to have a stranger in my space, if only because it made the loss of Max sting just slightly less. "Any tips on surviving the first day?"

She grimaced. "Not really. Things are kind of… *intense* with the Heirs here. And it's never, um, *great* for the scholarship students in particular. But you look… tough?"

I chuckled. Any thin skin I once had had been shed the moment Bruce pulled me from the Obsidian.

And this place couldn’t break something that had already been broken beyond repair.

CHAPTER FOUR



On Monday morning, I woke up early, threw on some clothes, and began my trek to the dining hall for breakfast. My scholarship came with a meal plan that provided three meals a day, and I intended to use it because, while Dom and Laura did okay for themselves, I was finished spending their money when I didn't have to.

Mari caught me in the hallway and tagged along, informing me that most students ate in the dining hall, even the ones with kitchens in their dorm rooms and a food delivery app connected to their parents' black cards. Apparently, the Academy food was excellent.

"You're sure that's what you want to wear on your first day, though?" Mari asked, eyeing my tight black jeans, soft V-neck T-shirt, and ratty slip-on Vans. "I know the handbook says there's not a *required* dress code, but…."

"Everyone dresses to impress?" I finished for her.

"Yeah. I mean, you'll see. I wouldn't call what the girls wear 'professional' so much as 'slutty *Gossip Girl*,' but it's more about the price tag on the label."

I just nodded thoughtfully like I was absorbing this information for the first time. While I knew that it would've been a good idea to attempt to blend in a bit more, I'd thought it was a better idea to be dismissed completely—and to be as far from what would have been expected of the Knight Heir as possible.

I am absolutely no one.

I had to admit Mari looked sharp in her high-waisted midthigh tartan skirt and creamy white collared blouse, a delicate bow adorning the collar. She also wore opaque black tights and chunky Mary Jane heels.

The whole outfit probably cost two grand.

“You do look great,” I told her. I hoped she sent a photo to her girlfriend this morning. “But you are also going to roast in those tights when it gets muggy as shit later.”

“*Joder*, I know. The sacrifices we make.”

We reached the steps of Holywell Hall, slipping into the stream of students headed to the dining hall that took up the entire east wing of the first floor. I was getting some *looks* as we made our way through the building, mostly of general disdain at what I was wearing, and then also a few leers from some gross assholes.

To Mari’s credit, she didn’t appear flustered or embarrassed to be seen with me, and she even snapped something in Spanish that sounded very aggressive at a guy after he made a kissy face at us both. I looked forward to learning some more Spanish swears if we continued to hang out.

We finally entered the dining hall to find it full and busy, the loud hum of laughing and chatter echoing in the cavernous space. The enormous room had thirty-foot ceilings, and a dozen antique chandeliers hung low throughout the room. There were buffet lines set up on either side of the hall, and big wooden banquet tables filled the rest of the space, separated into two sections by a long aisle down the middle.

“I’ll go grab us plates,” Mari said next to my ear. “One of the servers is my yoga instructor’s son, so he lets me cut the line.”

“Cool,” I replied as I dropped my bag into the nearest empty seat. “I’ll be here.”

It took me a minute to catalogue my surroundings. The boys all had on some version of a suit or slacks, some with a jacket and tie, others without. The girls wore skirts or sharp dresses, most with hem lengths that were not exactly what I’d call “professional.” I saw silk blouses, cashmere sweaters, and a hell of a lot of designer shoes. There was an abundance of pastels and plaids, and it hurt my eyes.

I'd just whipped my phone out to check in with Max when the chatter in the hall suddenly dimmed, and the crowd that had been lingering around the doors parted as if the movement had been rehearsed.

Three boys strode into the hall, their steps easy and confident, and they marched straight down the center aisle without so much as a glance around them. They took up their seats at a small, private table at the front of the room that was perched on an honest-to-God dais.

My stomach had flipped and my adrenaline had spiked the instant they'd entered the hall. The reverent behavior of the rest of the students told me without even having to look that these were my marks.

The Heirs. Bennett Spencer, Zach Ferrero, and Noah Hargraves.

My former best friends.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting to feel when I laid eyes on them for the first time in seven years, but as they turned to face their adoring public up on that dais, and I was able to really *look* at them, it was as if someone had put their fist straight through my chest.

My memories of them suddenly rushed to the surface of my brain after having long been buried and threatened to overwhelm me completely. I could still make out the boys I'd once known in their faces, but they were definitely grown men now. Bennett had just turned twenty, and the other two were nineteen—and apparently, they were now also *gorgeous,* all fucking three of them.

I shook off my momentary paralysis, extremely irritated that the mere sight of them had knocked the wind straight out of me. So, as their fanboys and girls began to rush their table like groupies at a rock concert, I pulled my shit together and got to work, studying them from my inconspicuous spot at a random table out among the masses.

Bennett sat in the middle, his posture stick straight as he surveyed his subjects with a cool, bored look. He was the tallest of the three by several inches, putting him somewhere close to six-foot-four. His chocolate-brown hair was styled into an artful coif on top while expertly faded on the sides. The baby face of my memories had hardened into sharp cheekbones and a chiseled jaw. He wore a

dark gray suit, tailored perfectly to his broad chest and shoulders, and though I couldn't see his eyes from where I was sitting, I knew his moss-green tie matched them almost perfectly. He was as serious as I remembered, ever the leader of the little gang.

Zach sat to his left, his lazy slouch a stark contrast to Bennett's rigidity, and he was smirking in the direction of one of the male students who'd approached their table and was now talking animatedly at him. His navy-blue tie hung loose around his neck, and he'd opted out of a suit jacket. He was the most muscular of the group, his corded *tattooed* forearms on full display where his shirtsleeves were rolled to his elbows. His black hair was cut similar to Bennett's, but he kept the top much messier, the disheveled strands falling onto his forehead. And it was hard to tell for sure from my vantage point, but I thought I saw a hint of silver glinting around his lower lip when he leaned over to say something to Bennett with a sly smile, so he may have a lip ring.

Apparently, Zach was off his leash while he was running around the Academy unsupervised, because I couldn't imagine the piercings and the multitudes of tattoos that I could make out *just* on his forearms were sanctioned by the Families. He looked like a rock star had a baby with a CEO.

Finally, my gaze moved to Noah. His kind smile hadn't changed much, and he still wore glasses, but the thin frames that had always been just a little too big for his face when we were kids had been replaced with stylish, thick-framed, dark ones. I knew from memory that his eyes were a deep blue color, and they were currently focused on the girl in front of him as he made polite conversation with her. She leaned suggestively over the table, cleavage on full display, and Noah's eyes somehow remained on her face even though she was very clearly trying to wave her boobs at him. His golden-blond hair was still a little shaggy, though it seemed he'd learned to tame it over the years because it now just looked expertly tousled. He was the leanest of the three, but by no means skinny, his slim navy suit accentuating his long limbs. He'd opted for no tie, the rebel, offering his adoring fans a tiny peek at his tanned chest. Of the three, he had the most approachable and inviting air about him, and I wondered how much of that was real.

“Here you go,” Mari said as she appeared next to me. She slid a plate full of bacon, eggs, and fruit in front of me, and she’d even put together to-go cups of coffee for us both. She tossed a cursory glance at the front of the hall and then just tucked into her breakfast, obviously uninterested in the activity there. “That’s the usual at mealtimes. The Tier Ones vying for inner-circle status. The single girls trying to catch their attention. Same shit, new year.”

“Mmm,” I grunted around a mouthful of bacon.

“There is one thing I should probably warn you ab—”

“Greetings, new students of Holywell Academy!”

One of the fanboys had jumped on top of a table at the front of the hall and was now commanding the attention of the room. It was Chad Hendrickson, sophomore and son of the owner of one of the largest hedge funds in the City. Hendrickson was solidly Tier One—meaning their net worth was in the eight-to-nine-figure range—and as financial industry titans, they were linked to Spencer.

“Chad Hendrickson, Tier One sophomore,” Mari whispered in my ear. “He fancies himself inner circle.”

“Oh, okay,” I replied like this was news to me.

“It’s that time again!” Chad shouted, waving his meaty arm around the room. He’d been kind of a chunky kid back when we attended the same private primary school, and he’d grown up to be a big, stocky guy with a comically thick neck and a buzz cut. He prattled on. “It’s a new year at Holywell, and we have all been *uniquely* blessed to be able to attend school alongside the *Heirs* of the Four Families who, for generations, have been responsible for the incredible prosperity of our fair City!”

A few cheers and polite claps sounded. My eggs suddenly tasted like ash, and I pushed my plate away from me with a firm shove.

Chad’s shit-eating grin got wider. “And because we are so lucky to have the Heirs at the Academy, some of us felt it was a great opportunity for those of you who are here on *scholarship*,” he spat, like it was a dirty word, “to be able to *personally* thank the Families for providing someone of your station the rare opportunity to receive the finest education in the country while walking the same halls as the next generation of leaders of this City.”

The snickering started then. A group of well-dressed girls seated at the other end of my table giggled loudly. I glanced across the way and quickly located a large group of what were likely the other scholarship students. Their clothes were normal instead of screaming high fashion, and they wore faces of either begrudging resignation or wide-eyed panic.

“Oh, is this how they’ve chosen to haze us?” I asked Mari lightly, taking a sip of my coffee.

“Ugh, I know, I’m sorry,” she moaned under her breath. “Just suffer through it and then forget about it, okay?”

I gave her a nonplussed shrug.

The Heirs watched this spectacle with only the mildest of interest, casually eating from the plates that had magically appeared in front of them at some point and occasionally talking amongst themselves.

Chad went on, “And so, we will be continuing the tradition we began last year for all of you lucky scholarship students! When I call your name, come on up!” He paused to pull his phone from his pocket, lifting it to his face to read from it. “Shannon Andersen!”

A tall redheaded girl wearing a simple khaki skirt and an ill-fitting polo shirt rose from the scholarship table. She made her way slowly down the aisle like she was being marched to the gallows, treading silently in her black ballet flats. She came to a stop in front of the Heirs’ table, not daring to look at them and staring at her feet instead.

“Ah, ah, ah, Shannon,” Chad taunted, his square face flushed with excitement. He hopped down from his tabletop and ambled over to her. “*Kneel,*” he commanded.

I saw red. I kept my face blank, a particular skill of mine, but I was white knuckling my fork so hard, I was lucky it didn’t snap in half.

Shannon blanched, but she did as she was told.

“Repeat after me, please, Shannon: thank you, Mr. Spencer, Mr. Ferrero, and Mr. Hargraves for your Families’ *benevolent generosity* in providing me with the opportunity of a lifetime. I will strive to prove I deserve the gift I’ve been given, and I will know my place within these walls, or else I will gladly crawl back to the slums from whence I came.”

Hahaha—oh, *fuck* no.

Poor Shannon's face was beet red, her hands trembling slightly, but she did as she had been ordered. Chad dismissed her, and she rushed back to her seat without a backward glance, her face still flaming.

And on it went. Some of the students clearly had been warned and had prepared themselves, going through the humiliating ritual with a sort of numbness, but others obviously hadn't been told what awaited them in this hellhole as they stammered or held back tears.

I studied the Heirs as this nonsense went on. It was as if nothing at all interesting was happening right in front of them. Noah's posture had stiffened, a hint of annoyance radiating from him, but Bennett and Zach just looked bored, continuing to chat amongst themselves and only occasionally glancing at whichever poor kid was currently prostrating at their feet.

Then finally, my number was up.

"Joanna Miller!"

I didn't move.

"Is there a Joanna Miller here? Freshman scholarship student, crew team, graduate of Southside High School…."

"Seriously? They're letting Southside trash in here now?" a nasally voice shouted from the group of girls huddled closest to the Heirs' table, eliciting raucous laughter from those around her.

"Joanna, just go and get it over with," Mari said urgently, nudging me with her elbow.

One of the girls seated down the way must've heard her because she decided to narc.

"She's over here, Chad!" She waved her bright pink manicure in my direction.

The entire room turned to look in our direction.

"Oh, I see you, Southside," Chad called, a vicious smile on his face as he spotted me—my T-shirt, messy ponytail, and scowl probably giving me away. "Hop to it. The Heirs don't have all day."

"No, thanks," I called back, and Mari sucked in a startled breath.

Chad's smile slid from his face. I stared him down, feeling every eye on me now.

Including the Heirs.

“Wrong answer, Southside,” Chad barked. “Get up here and get on your knees, or you won’t like the consequences.”

I stood up, throwing my backpack over my shoulder and grabbing my coffee before jamming my earbuds into my ears. I gave Mari an apologetic pat on the shoulder, then I stalked toward the aisle. I turned the opposite direction, headed for the exit, then I paused to toss a quick look back over my shoulder.

“Shove it up your ass, Chad,” I said, and then I left the hall.

CHAPTER FIVE



"You did *what*?"

Dom's deep voice boomed through my earbuds since Max had decided that he needed to make my life harder by putting my call on speaker.

"What part of *keep a low profile* did you not get?" Dom continued. I could hear him banging around in the kitchen as he spoke.

"Dom, I would rather actually drown in the Obsidian than get on my fucking knees in front of the Heirs and their flock of asslickers like that."

"Hell yeah," Max chimed in. "That's our girl."

"Max! You're not helping," Dom griped.

"Look," I said, changing the subject. "Is there anything I need to know about yesterday's perimeter check, Max?"

"Not really," he replied, his mouth full of whatever he was eating for breakfast before going to school. "It's as we suspected—they've added Family Enforcers on rotation at the gates, but the Heirs aren't closely watched while they're on campus. No personal bodyguards. The tech on their dorm penthouse security system is top-of-the-line, but it's nothing we haven't seen before."

"You got into A Dorm? My barcode wouldn't get you in there."

He chuckled. "I met a nice girl on my way over there. She let me use her bathroom, and I now have a high-resolution picture of her ID. I'll be getting you your duplicate with the A Dorm access as soon as we get it made."

Stellar. Dom had been hesitant to let Max to join an organization like the Shadows so young, but he was proving himself every day.

"You're the best," I replied. "Alright, I gotta go to class. I'm going to spend a few weeks just getting the lay of the land. Let me know if anything changes in the meantime."

"Will do. Bye, Jojo."

Jamming to "The Taste of Ink" by The Used, I began my walk to my first class, which unfortunately had me heading right back to Holywell Hall. I'd ducked outside and found myself a private tree to lean against as I called Max for updates, and I'd also needed a minute to numb myself again and tamp down the urge to break Chad Hendrickson's face with my fist.

I'd expected some ill-treatment of scholarship students from the general population, but that particular experiment had hit just a little too close to home for me.

I regretted nothing.

Ignoring everyone as I found the small lecture hall where my World History II class was located, I climbed the shallow steps to the back of the room and grabbed an empty seat. I pulled my tablet out, intending to look up the syllabus, when Mari dropped into the seat next to me.

I shot her a questioning glance, more than a little surprised. "Are you sure about this?"

She shrugged. "I didn't grow up around these people. My parents sent me to boarding school abroad for most of my education before they dragged me back here to ensure I had the Holywell degree that would give me the right clout in City society." She paused, narrowing her eyes at the group of Tier One girls that had just flounced into the room, gave us both the stink eye, and had then taken up seats a few rows ahead of us. "I learned last year that I kind of… hate everyone here. I don't really care what they think."

"If you say so," I replied. I wouldn't be able to let her get *too* close, but I liked Mari and didn't mind if she wanted to hang around. "So, what happened after I left?"

She cringed before whispering. "Chad and a couple of his buddies were about to go after you, but then Bennett just goes, '*Hendrickson, leave it*,' all calm and scary-like."

“Huh.” Lucky me. As much as I might’ve enjoyed kicking Chad’s ass after his little show, it would’ve complicated things.

Mari was over it too, apparently. “What are you doing in sophomore-level History anyway?” she asked.

I gave her a droll look. “Even us Southsiders can take advanced placement tests.”

And my marks were sophomores, after all.

The door to the classroom opened again, and the buzz of chatter intensified instantly as Zach waltzed in, trailed by a couple of his fanboys, including a guy I recognized as Dane Jefferson. His Tier One family owned a chain of wildly popular boutique fitness studios and was affiliated with Hargraves.

They filed into the empty seats in the middle of the room. Zach sprawled out in his chair like a lazy king, and I watched the group of girls in front of me as they hung on his every move.

“I spoke to Zach after breakfast,” Lisa Aviano, bar and nightclub heiress linked to Ferrero, cooed at her friends. She twirled her thick dark hair around her finger as she eyed him through her heavy black lashes. “I’m so close to getting him into my bed to seal the deal. My mom is practically *best* friends with Andrea.”

Hannah Langford, daughter of tech venture capitalists once under the Knight umbrella, snorted at her. “You know the Heirs only fuck at the Club, honey, where they have the City’s hottest professionals and iron-clad NDAs. But good luck to you.”

The Euphoria Club—Andrea Ferrero’s pride and joy. Classy burlesque club downstairs, professional sex workers upstairs, all catering to the richest and most exclusive clientele in the City. It also had a secret basement that… interested me.

I ignored the stomach swoop I felt at the idea of my ex-best friends fucking the City’s most in-demand, highest-paid sex workers, while Lisa pouted.

“But Noah had a girlfriend last year,” she whined.

“And we all know how that turned out,” Hannah replied.

The professor finally cleared her throat and began her lecture, so that was the end of my eavesdropping.

Class was uneventful, and I thought the coursework seemed manageable. While I might’ve found myself behind had I spent all of

my formative years in Southside, I'd had eleven years of the finest education and private tutors money could buy.

When the professor dismissed the class, Mari and I began to file out, me on my way to my freshman Literature class and her to Economics. We were on the stairs when someone rammed into me from behind.

"Move, trash," a feminine voice barked at me, eliciting a few giggles from her friends and knocking me hard enough that I stumbled off the last stair.

I smacked right into a hard body, and strong hands grabbed me, keeping me on my feet. A deep voice purred, "Woah, easy there."

I looked up, and I was met with the familiar dark-chocolate gaze of Zach Ferrero. He kept a firm grip on both of my biceps, holding me in place as he looked me over, a smirk forming on his face that was so twelve-year-old Zach, but also so *not*. "Hey, look who I found. It's the Southside Princess."

I straightened, glancing down at where he held onto me, and then back up to his face. "Thanks for the catch, Ferrero. Now get your fucking hands off me."

His eyebrows shot up for a fraction of a second, but then he gave me what I suspected was his panty-meltingest smile. "And here I thought you were ready to get on your knees for me after all."

Internal eye roll. Why were all guys the same?

I arched an eyebrow at him, leaning in to whisper in his ear, "Yeah? You have a thing for slumming it, rich boy?"

He chuckled, and it sounded like sex. "Not before this morning, I didn't."

My nerves were spiking. *Too close, Jolie. He's too close.*

With a quick jerk, I rotated my arms and yanked them out of his grip, then I moved him out of my personal space with a firm shove to his rock-hard chest. "Fuck off. And keep your hands to yourself."

As I marched out the door, aiming for a wide-eyed Mari where she waited for me in the hall, I heard him cackling at Dane behind me.

"You guys have your work cut out for you with that one. I can't wait."



My freshman Lit class was, thankfully, extremely uneventful. Nobody spoke to me, and I was happy about it.

Lunch in the dining hall had been the same, though I'd been on my guard the whole time. The Heirs ate at their usual table and ignored just about everyone, and while a few sneers had been tossed my way by both Chad's and Lisa's crew, everyone behaved.

I didn't exactly trust it, but I wouldn't complain.

My afternoon class on Mondays and Wednesdays was the Technology Skills seminar—a requirement for all students to graduate. I wandered into the computer lab on the top floor of Holywell Hall and found a seat among the rows of the highest caliber Knight PCs currently on the market.

The other students gave me a wide berth, though I couldn't help but feel more than a shade of annoyance as Annie Ling, member of Lisa's Tier One squad and heir to a private hospital empire, took a seat in the row in front of me. She dropped her Hermes handbag dramatically on the tabletop next to her computer, then began chattering away to Hannah Langford and Nick Ruiz, a Tier Two student whose family ran an up-and-coming chain of holistic wellness clinics with a healthy dose of money and involvement from Hargraves.

At the top of the hour, our very pregnant professor waddled in. Entering right behind her was Noah.

The class went all atwitter, and the professor chuckled, motioning for everyone to calm the fuck down.

"As you all can see," she said, rubbing her belly, "I am heading out on maternity leave any minute now. I've asked my TA, Mr. Hargraves, to step in to teach the class while I'm out. I can assure you he is very proficient in all manner of technology skills and will be able to answer any question you may have."

Noah smiled warmly at the class, his eyes lingering on me for a half a beat longer than everyone else before he took up his post behind the professor's desk. He set his sleek black laptop on the desktop and opened it, the white horse on the back of its screen taunting me from the front of the room.

It didn't surprise me that Noah had become some sort of tech wiz. He'd always taken an interest in computers when we were younger, and I had memories of him asking my dad questions or even working on small projects with him whenever the boys had been over at our penthouse. I remembered how excited he'd been that my dad had even given him the time of day the first time he'd asked.

My mouth suddenly felt dry, and I swallowed roughly. I'd have avoided sitting here surrounded by my Family's creations, especially if I'd have known Noah was going to be teaching the fucking class, if it hadn't been required for graduation. I'd expected it would be hard not to think about my dad, but this was going to be *torture*.

"Thanks, Professor Moore," Noah said, and she just waved to him as she waddled back out the door, apparently already checking out of teaching this class. He went on, "I know you all know who I am, and please just call me Noah. We're going to start our unit on data privacy with an assessment test so I can see where everyone is, so please log into your computers to access the test."

We all did as we were told. I worked through mine, making sure I got about half of the questions wrong, and Noah started wandering around the room, checking on students' progress and answering questions.

"You're drooling," I heard Hannah snark at Annie, whose eyes were not on her computer and instead glued to Noah wherever he moved in the room.

"Shut up," Annie huffed at her. "You're just jealous you don't have the attention of an Heir. My family had dinner with his several times over the summer, and just believe me when I say our chemistry is *amazing*."

"Uh-huh," Hannah mumbled, still working through her test. "Sure."

"Finished already?" a smooth voice said into my ear, jolting me out of my eavesdropping.

I turned to find Noah sliding into the empty station next to me, a curious look on his painfully pretty face. Up close, I could see his eyes were the same deep blue I remembered, and the dark brown of his rectangular frames made them pop even more.

“Just a bunch of random guesses,” I replied with a shrug, tearing my eyes from his face and locking them on my screen. “Our *tech* curriculum at Southside High wasn’t quite up to Holywell standards.”

“I see,” he said with the patience of a teacher. “Well, don’t worry. We’ll get you up to speed in no time.”

“Hmm.” I twirled a pen between my fingers, trying not to squirm under the intensity of his gaze on the side of my face. After unexpectedly finding myself up close and personal with both Zach and him today, I was glad I’d decided to start wearing tinted foundation that made my pale skin a little tanner and hid the light dusting of freckles I’d always had across my nose and cheeks. I said, “Aren’t you supposed to be rooting for me to fail out of this place? It’s quite a ways above my *station*, after all.”

“No,” he said, sounding amused. “It’s my job to teach you. And I don’t personally have an issue with those here on scholarship.”

I snorted. “Ah, I did hear that you’re the *nice* one.”

Before he could respond, Annie whirled around in her seat. “Noah,” she whined, “I think one of these questions has *two* correct answers. I don’t want to have it counted against me if I pick the wrong one.”

I caught a hint of an eye roll before he replied, pleasantly, “It’s not for a grade, Annie. Just pick whichever one you think is the most correct.”

She batted her long lashes at him, her silky blouse unbuttoned just low enough to tease a hint of cleavage below her string of pearls as she turned further around in her chair. She whispered, all breathy and obvious, “I was hoping I could talk to you after class? I think you’ll find I know plenty already, and we could have a very *stimulating* discussion.”

Gross.

“Is that so?” Noah asked, chuckling.

Hannah, thankfully, was over it. “Annie, do I need to remind you what happened to Christine last year?” She leaned in like she was trying to speak softly into Annie’s ear, but she was loud enough that I could still make out what she was saying. “After she and Noah dated for six months, she tried to get a meeting with him and his father about an investment in the new company she and her dad wanted to

start. Not only did Noah deny her request, he broke up with her, bankrupted her father by pulling all Hargraves funding from their current business, and ran the entire family out of town. I'm just saying… trying to land an Heir is not fucking worth it."

Damn.

I tried to wipe the shocked look off my face, but Noah was too quick for me.

"You see," he said, leaning in to speak softly next to my ear. "I'm not always the *nice* one."

Then he stood up and strode off toward another row of students, leaving me to ponder exactly what the fuck had happened to Noah Hargraves.

CHAPTER SIX



"Shh! He's coming, he's coming!"

"You're being too loud, Zach!"

"No, you're being too loud, Jojo!"

"You're both loud!" Noah rolled his eyes at us before he crawled to the door of my mom's giant closet, and he laid flat on the ground, trying to look through the tiny crack of light under the door to see if he could spot Bennett.

We hadn't picked a very creative place to hide, but the penthouse was so big, it could take Bennett a long time to find us.

"Get off me Zach! You're in my space," I whined.

"Don't be such a baby. I'm not even touching you."

His socked foot poked me twice, and I shrieked at him, "Stop it, Zach!"

"He's coming!" Noah whisper-yelled, scurrying back to where we were hiding behind rows of very expensive dresses and throwing himself in between us.

The closet door burst open, and the harsh light of the bathroom now beamed directly on our hiding spot.

"You guys are terrible at this," Bennett grumbled, throwing the dresses wide and staring down at us like he was so much smarter than we were.

"Yeah, but you're a sucker!" Zach yelled, then he barreled into Bennett's legs, taking him to the ground.

“Argh!” Bennett shouted as they fell, and then Noah and I jumped onto the pile.

We shouted and laughed until Bennett finally managed to throw us off. Then my mom called for us, probably because lunch was ready, and I heard her come into the bathroom.

I rolled off Noah’s back, my eyes landing on where my mom stood at the entrance to the closet.

Her face was covered in blood, the thick red liquid dripping down her neck and onto her white sweater. A huge chunk of her skull was missing. She fell to her knees.

“Mom!” I screamed.

I jolted awake, my heart pounding out of my chest and my tank top soaked through with sweat.

“Fuck. *Fuck*,” I panted, trying to catch my breath.

I hadn’t had a nightmare about my parents in years. They’d often started just as this one had—a very real memory that would then mutate into a horrifying scene involving my parents’ bleeding or dead bodies.

Being around the Heirs again was fucking with my head.

I dragged myself out of bed and took the world’s fastest shower to rid myself of my nightmare sweat. I threw on cropped white jeans with a few rips in them, a dark-blue tank top, and my Vans. My dark hair went into a high ponytail, and I smeared my tinted foundation on my face. After a quick coat of mascara to darken my blonde lashes, I was out the door with my backpack that was always packed and ready to go.

I needed to haul ass to the dining hall to grab something to eat on the go or else I was going to be late to my first Leadership Seminar, a class students were required to take in either freshman or sophomore year. Per the syllabus and a reminder email from last night, we were going to be writing an in-class essay first thing this morning that would be one-third of our grade.

With “Ruthless” by Something Corporate thrumming in my ears, I hustled over to Holywell Hall. I breezed through the doors of the dining hall, singularly focused on grabbing a bagel and a coffee when I was accosted in front of the coffee creamer.

“Good morning, Southside,” Chad purred at me, appearing like a gnat in my personal space. “I’m just here to inquire as to whether you’ve wised up after having twenty-four hours to contemplate your insubordinate behavior. The Heirs await you at the front of the hall, and the longer you refuse to kneel, the worse things are going to get for you.”

I stirred my coffee and snapped the lid in place before turning toward the bagel station.

“Hey, slum trash, I’m talking to you,” Chad barked, following me.

I tossed a look over my shoulder like I’d only just noticed he was there. “Oh, sorry, dickface!” I said loudly, motioning to my earbuds that were still firmly in my ears. “I can’t hear you!” I grabbed my bagel and then gave him two middle fingers and a smile as I backed away from the table, then I turned and hightailed it back outside to check in with Dom.



Ten minutes later, I made it to the door of the large lecture hall where the Leadership Seminar was being held. I still had five minutes before class started, but I planned to hustle to my seat to get situated before test time.

Except when I turned the handle, the door was locked.

Chad’s stupid fucking face appeared in the thin pane of glass that was set into the door. A girl stood next to him, wearing an equally self-satisfied smirk, and I recognized her instantly.

Harper Jansen, freshman and daughter of a long line of Tier One bank owners very closely affiliated with Spencer. Her mother was also the fucking *Dean* of Holywell. Harper ran around with Lisa and Annie and the group of top girls who thought they were inner-circle material.

Chad tapped his watch, shrugging at me like he was confused as to why I was still standing outside the door. I knew that the professor, whoever it was, wasn’t going to “interfere in student business” either, so I was fucked.

I banged my fist up against the window in frustration before I tore away, stalking down the hall while dialing Max.

“What’s up, Jojo?”

“Hey, those assholes just locked me out of a class that I’ll fail if I’m not inside the room in less than five minutes to take a test. If I fail this class, I’ll flunk out of the Academy.”

“What the f—”

“Do you have the blueprints of Holywell Hall handy? I need a way in.”

“Uh, yeah. Hang on.”

I hurried around the corner and skidded to a stop on the other side of the back wall of the classroom, then Max said, “Got it up. What floor?”

“Second, west wing. Room 201.”

“Okay, head around the corner from the door toward the windows. There should be a storage closet along that wall.”

I spotted it a few doors away, and I rushed to open it.

“Fuck—locked.” I yanked my backpack to the floor, unzipped the middle pocket, and pulled out my lockpick kit. I reshouldered my backpack, then I got to work.

“Get it?”

“Yeah, I’m in.”

“Okay, see if you can climb up through the ceiling tiles. It’s a drop ceiling, so if you can get up there, shimmy over about ten feet and then jump down through the tiles and into the back of the room. Try to grab at some piping or something while you’re up there so you’re not putting all of your weight on the tiles, or you’ll fall right through them.”

“You’re a fucking king. Thanks, Max.”

“Someone’s gotta keep your ass out of trouble.”

I ended the call with a tap to my earbuds, and then I clambered up the shelves in the closet, which were cluttered with cleaning supplies, and I reached the top without issue. I pushed one of the large tiles upward before sliding it to the side, then I pulled myself up and into the opening.

Copper piping ran alongside the large silver cylinder of the air duct, and I grasped it first with my hands before pulling my legs up to

do the same. After shimmying down the pipe like an oversized monkey for what I guessed was enough distance, I reached below me, nudging at the tile, and peeked in.

The classroom below was large, holding maybe two hundred students in the auditorium-style seating that curved in a semicircle around the professor's podium and whiteboard. It looked like the right place, but I quickly confirmed it when I spotted Chad's fat head still lurking near the classroom door to make sure no one allowed me in.

I pulled the tile back further and then swung myself down and onto the ledge of the high windowsill nearest to me on the side wall. I balanced there for a few seconds, then I jumped the rest of the way down to the floor, landing with an audible thud.

The entire class turned around.

I saluted Chad and Harper, who still stood at the front of the room and were now glaring absolute daggers at me, and then I tossed myself into the first available seat I came across.

None too early because the professor had just begun passing out the test, and he rapped his knuckles loudly on an unsuspecting student's desk in the front row to refocus the class.

"That was impressive, Princess."

I blew out an annoyed breath before turning around to face the row behind me, finding not only Zach sprawled out in his chair and smirking at me, but Noah and Bennett seated next to him. Noah had a bemused smile on his face, while Bennett wore the same blank expression as always, though his green eyes studied me with an intensity that made me twitchy.

Fucking perfect.

"Seriously, I thought Hendrickson's head was going to explode when you just fell out of the ceiling like that," Zach went on. "They teach parkour at Southside High these days?"

"I'm resourceful," I deadpanned before turning back to face the front, the test papers now making their way down my row.

"Stop looking so excited, man," Noah muttered. "You'll only encourage Chad, and he'll take it too far."

"I hope so," Zach replied. "This is the most entertainment we've had in a while."

Noah sighed. “Fine, but you’re on your own if something happens and they decide we’re on cleanup.”

“Nah, the Princess is tough. Aren’t you, Princess?”

I lifted my middle finger over my shoulder, willing them to shut the fuck up so I could focus on the essay prompt.

Zach chuckled. “See.”

“Don’t encourage her either,” Noah hissed at him. “She has no idea what she’s getting herself into.”

Then Bennett finally spoke, his chilly timber sending goosebumps up my arms. “I don’t think that’s true, actually.”



By lunchtime, news of my antics had apparently already made the rounds. The incredulous look on Mari’s face when she collapsed into the chair across from me in the dining hall said it all, and I simply reminded her that it was either that or be expelled.

“I guess,” she said begrudgingly, taking a delicate bite of her salad. “I *would* miss you if you were gone. No one else has the lady balls to call Chad a dickhead to his face.”

Later, after sequestering myself in my room for a few hours to work on homework, it was time for crew practice—my Tuesday and Thursday afternoon block for the fall semester.

I tossed on a sports bra, my gym shirt, and some track shorts before tightening up my ponytail and grabbing my cheap sunglasses. I meandered down to where the Academy’s boathouse sat on the banks of the western fork of the Obsidian River. Entering the girls’ locker room, I found the locker labeled with my name, ignoring the wary glances I was getting from the rest of the team. I changed into my Academy-issued kit and sat down to lace up the fanciest rowing shoes I’d ever had on my feet while the coach—a middle-aged, no-nonsense woman named Janet who was in the best shape I’d ever seen—barked instructions at us.

It was easy to discern the two distinct groups of athletes in the room. On one side of the locker room were the rich girls from Tier One and Tier Two families who’d grown up at the yacht club and

were just here for a gold star on their resume. On the other side were the girls attending the Academy on athletic scholarship, here to seize the opportunity to obtain the Holywell degree that might give them some kind of upward mobility in the City.

When Coach finished with our first-day instructions, we filed out of the locker room, making our way down to the open grass near the docks. The boys' team was already warming up nearby, and I instantly spotted Bennett among them.

I wasn't the only one. It was my lousy luck that Harper Jansen was also joining the crew team, and I was treated to her prattling loudly to her friends as they pretended to stretch while avidly watching Bennett and the few guys from his team he let hang around him.

"It's almost a done deal," Harper purred with a haughty, self-satisfied smile. "Daddy's been in talks with James Spencer about beginning the negotiations for a formal *engagement*."

She tossed her long dark-blonde ponytail over her shoulder as she bent over to stretch her hamstrings, making sure her ass was pointed in the direction of the guys. Her friends gasped and cooed their fakest congratulations at her, while I ignored the pit that suddenly dropped into my stomach at the prospect of Bennett's arranged marriage.

He'd known, even as a preteen, that there was a chance his parents would push for something like this. Theirs was an arranged marriage, and it had been a dying tradition among the Four Families and the top Tiers for generations. But the rest of our parents had all been love matches—even Medusa incarnate Andrea Ferrero to Zach's late father—so it wasn't as if arranged marriage was a requirement of the Families. Young Bennett had talked about it with a sort of resigned acceptance, but none of us thought much about it back then because that kind of thing was a grown-up problem.

I'd only been on campus for a few days, but I hadn't seen Bennett pay much attention to anyone who wasn't Zach or Noah, and certainly not Harper, but that didn't mean things weren't in the works.

As I stood up from my own stretching, I couldn't help but smirk in Harper's direction.

She was going to be shit out of luck because there wouldn't be a Spencer empire to marry into if I had anything to say about it.

"Something funny, gutter trash?" Harper snapped at me. "You look a little too happy for a dead girl walking."

Well, that was a little extreme, but okay. "I was just thinking I should congratulate you on your upcoming nuptials, Jansen," I replied. "I wish you a long and happy life as medicated arm candy trapped in a writhing pit of snakes."

Gasps rang out all around.

Was that too far?

"How *dare* you, you stupid, low-class bitch!" Harper shrieked. "Just who the hell do you think you are?"

Everyone was staring now, including Janet, the boys' team, and their coach.

"I'm nobody, Harper," I said flatly. "Not sure you or your future husband should give a shit what I think."

"You're going to pay for that, you dirty slut," she sputtered at me. "No one insults the Four Families, especially not a lowlife like *you*."

"Ladies!" Janet shouted, barging into our space in the nick of time. "On the water! Move it!"

With one last hateful look at me, Harper marched off to begin her workout, teamed up with her buddies in her crew of four. Janet was wise enough to make sure she stuck those of us on scholarship in the same boats, so my hour on the water was a little awkward but mercifully free of entitled assholes with bad attitudes.

When practice was over, I took my sweet time making my way back to the locker room, hoping to avoid everyone. I paused out in the hallway, pulling my phone out to shoot a message to Dom, who was going to murder me, to forewarn him about how truly terrible I was turning out to be at *laying low*.

Text sent, I glanced up from my phone and found myself looking straight into the same mossy green eyes that were burned into my very last memory of my time as the Knight Heir.

Bennett loomed in front of me, wearing a long-sleeve crew-team shirt and gym shorts that revealed long, muscular legs, and he smelled freshly showered. He stared me down with the cold intensity that seemed to have become a permanent fixture on his face.

I pocketed my phone, then I crossed my arms and held his green eyes with my violet ones. I said nothing—he clearly had a reason for approaching me in this deserted hallway, so he needed to get on with it.

After a few long seconds of a stare-off, he finally spoke. “Unlike everyone else here, I do not think you’re some ignorant girl from the slums who doesn’t know her place. It’s clear to me that you’re an extremely *intelligent* girl from the slums who knew exactly what this Academy would be when she chose to come here.”

I quirked an eyebrow at him. “Careful, Spencer. That was dangerously close to a compliment. I’m sure it’s bad enough you’re speaking to me at all.”

His lips pursed, but he ignored my words. “You know who you are and what this place is. You shouldn’t be at Holywell if you can’t accept how things are done here. Either fall in line or get out.”

Still super fucking bossy, I see.

I stepped an inch closer to him, the two of us nearly toe-to-toe now, and I craned my neck to stare straight into his eyes—eyes that I might have expected to be dead and lifeless by now, seven years after James Spencer had pulled back the curtain. But in this moment, at least, they were lit up from within, all fire and righteousness, and it only made my own burn hotter.

“I’m *exactly* where I need to be,” I replied, my words sure. “If you and the *leeches* you call your peers can’t handle that, it isn’t my problem.”

I dropped his stare and stepped around him, but he reached out, quick as lightning, and caught my hand.

My heart skipped, and I tensed.

“I won’t call them off,” he said, his voice low and threaded with warning.

I just stared down at where his big hand gripped mine. I could’ve thrown him off the second he touched me, but I didn’t, I fucking *didn’t*—I just stood there and let him hold my hand while I braced against the barrage of memories of my best friend that threatened to bury me where I stood.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less of a Spencer,” I murmured.

He frowned, and finally I tore my hand away, intent on putting as much space as possible between Bennett Spencer and me from now on.

CHAPTER SEVEN



I put my head down and focused on my classwork and my mission, and before I knew it, a month had passed.

Most of my days started with a morning workout, either out on the water or on the indoor rowing erg, before I would drag my ass back to my room to shower, reapply my makeup, and put on whatever “cheap” clothes struck my fancy. I’d try to check in with Dom or Max most mornings before or after breakfast, and then I’d go about my day, attempting to get into the fewest verbal altercations possible.

The bullying by Chad, Harper, and their cronies had continued, mostly in the form of a ban on anyone speaking to me and the usual uncreative verbal insults tossed my way in the hallways. I’d had soup and drinks and other shit “accidentally” spilled on me in the dining hall more than once. I’d also had to walk back to my dorm in a towel after crew practice once after my clothes had disappeared from my locker, which now had a new industrial lock on it thanks to Dom.

It was all fucking stupid, and none of it really phased me, but I knew better than to think it couldn’t get worse.

Mari stuck by me through all of this, earning my great respect, and I’d noticed that when she was at my side, I was mostly just ignored. Apparently, no one had the balls to fuck with an Anzaldua, “outcast” status or not.

We’d taken to studying together, usually in her room—I didn’t want her to accidentally come across something in mine she

shouldn't see—or tucked away in the library stacks. She video-called her girlfriend daily, and though she wore a brave face, I knew her relationship with her parents had soured further, and it was eating at her.

I also did my best to keep my distance from the Heirs, feeling a little rattled by my unplanned interactions with all three of them during my first days here. I'd known it would be hard to see them again after all these years. I'd even suspected that it might trigger that longing for the time when I was still *whole*—a happy kid with two loving parents and three best friends, blissfully unaware of the festering rot around me. And I'd had no false hopes that the three of them hadn't grown up to be exactly what they were—little princes lording over their kingdom, callous and cold.

But I hadn't anticipated the draw that still pulled me toward those unfeeling bastards, the familiarity and the little hints of the boys I knew still there, and it was messing with my head.

Zach liked to needle me, stirring the pot whenever possible, giving me little bits of flirty attention here and there, if only to rile up the sheep trying to impress him. I rarely took his bait, but it never did deter him.

Noah seemed mildly interested in me, like one would be on discovering new species of insect, but he, at least, was considerate enough of the target on my back not to give me special attention during Tech Skills class or at any other time.

Bennett never spoke to me again after that first day, but I felt him watching me when we were in the same room. I suspected he was waiting for me to put my toe out of line one more time so he could order me to leave again, and I just hoped he'd get bored of me eventually.

But the fact that I was keeping my distance from the Heirs didn't mean I wasn't keeping a close eye on them, learning their schedules and their movements. They kept to their classes and school activities like the rest of us, then they usually retreated to their ivory tower in A Dorm. They left campus occasionally, especially on the weekends, but they were never really gone long, seeming to prefer their home here to their respective Family Towers.

They were even nice enough to leave all together a few times, so my creeping around A Dorm and *maybe* planting a little extra something behind the panel of their penthouse security system went unnoticed.

I did travel back home once, making sure to exit and reenter campus undetected. I used ways in and out that were not through the gates, just to ensure I could do it. Max also visited me a few times, breaking and entering in a similar fashion even though he was on the approved list as my family and could have waltzed in the front door.

By the second week of October, I felt ready to make my first move.

“Knock, knock,” I said with a rap of my knuckles on Noah’s open office door. “Still a good time to meet?”

Noah looked up from whatever he was doing on his laptop, pushing his glasses up his nose with his finger in a move that made my heart pinch, and he motioned me into his office with his professional smile.

“Yes, definitely,” he said. “Have a seat.”

I’d requested a meeting during Noah’s office hours, supposedly to get his help with our most recent assignment in Tech Skills. It was the easiest way to get him alone, but it wasn’t really him I wanted.

It was his laptop.

“So, have you lived in Southside all of your life?” he asked me offhandedly after we’d gone over the assignment. “Or are you a transplant to our fair City?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Taking an interest in the nobodies now, Hargraves?”

He shrugged, giving me his charming smile. “Just making conversation, *Miller*.”

Or fishing for information. I had little doubt that at some point someone on Team Heirs had pulled my background, and they would have found everything they needed to confirm I was exactly who I said I was—right down to my standardized test scores from an elementary school in Durham.

“I moved to Southside to live with my aunt and uncle when I was eleven,” I replied. “After a family tragedy.”

His smile faded, and he nodded, an understanding look on his face. “I get that. Trust me.”

Sure, Noah.

He steered the conversation to lighter topics. “So, what’s with the purple eyes?”

“Violet.”

He chuckled. “What’s with the violet eyes? Do you change colors according to your mood, or…?”

“Something like that. Wouldn’t want people to think I was trying to fit in or anything.”

He grimaced. “You know, you really should consider just… giving them what they want. I know you’re tough and all, but things can get a lot worse than they already are. You could have a much better four years here if you just….” He waved a hand, giving me a pointed look.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “What? Got on my knees in front of you three to grovel? To kiss your shoes and thank you and your benevolent Families for raising me from the dregs of the City where I belong?”

He sighed. “That wasn’t our idea. I just want you to know that.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, barking out a laugh. “Sure, that makes it so much better.”

“Look,” he snapped. “We don’t interfere in what the others do. If we put a stop to something like this, it will get back to our parents eventually. And trust me, that could make things worse.”

That I did believe—James, Peter, and Andrea were reprehensible scum without a conscience between them.

“Don’t worry about me, Noah,” I said tersely. “I’m not your problem.”

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. That was Max, letting me know it was go time.

On cue, Noah’s phone blared at him. He frowned at the screen before getting to his feet. “Excuse me for a minute,” he said, putting the phone to his ear. “I have to make a quick call.”

He strode quickly from the office, shutting the door behind him.

I dug my external drive from my backpack, then leaned over the desk to connect it to Noah’s computer. Since he’d been on it fifteen seconds ago, it was still unlocked. I initiated the cloning process,

pulling everything from his hard drive, including his email, even his recent keystrokes. It would be close, but Noah was going to be sorting through the mess Max just made of the security system on their dorm penthouse for at least five minutes.

I needed four.

“Come on, come on, come on,” I chanted under my breath. “Do this for mama, you beautiful machine.”

The thing about the Families was that each had their own way that they handled security. For Hargraves, and specifically for the private areas accessible only to the Family itself, they used keypads with codes that were changed weekly. We knew that those codes were sent to the Family members and the staff that needed them via encrypted email.

I wanted in Peter Hargraves’ private library. For that, I needed Noah’s code.

The computer chimed, telling me the process was complete, and I quickly set the screen to sleep. Thirty seconds later, Noah walked back in to find me lounging in my chair, bored to death by what was in my TikTok feed.

He ran a hand through his wavy blond hair, looking harried. “Sorry about that. False alarm. I think.”

“Huh,” I said with a shrug, then I stood up. “Well, I should be going anyway. I’m good on the homework.”

“Okay,” he replied, distracted. “Just… think about what I said.”

About how I should just go ahead and get on my knees for them?

I paused at the door. “Noah,” I said seriously, hoping the gravity of what I was about to say was clear to him.

He looked up from his phone. “Yeah?”

“Over my dead fucking body. You got that?”

He stared at me, endearing smile nowhere to be seen, and his blue eyes bored into me with such force that he gave Bennett a run for his money.

“It’s your funeral, Joanna.”

I left, slamming the door behind me.



That night, Mari interrupted my debrief with Dom by banging on my door and informing me that it was Fight Night.

"Oh, how cute," Dom drawled, overhearing her hollering. "The rich kids have their own little fights. Do you think it's fencing with the fake swords and the goofy suits?"

I opened the door, and Mari breezed in without a word and went straight into my closet to find me some version of what she thought was an acceptable Fight Night outfit, I presumed.

"I guess I'll check it out," I said to Dom. "You know anything about it?"

"Yeah, the Enforcer teams sometimes recruit there for high-level positions that are closer to the Family. Kids with the right pedigree and all that."

"Lame. Well, gotta go."

Mari stomped out of my closet in a huff. "I thought surely you would have something appropriately skanky to wear to this thing."

I barked out a laugh. "Why, because I'm from Southside?"

"Um, no, because you're eighteen and you're smoking hot. Why aren't you showing it off?"

"Is skanky the dress code?"

She quirked an eyebrow at me. "Isn't it always, around here?"

Half an hour later, I was dressed in a black crop top and some high-waisted denim cutoff shorts that only just covered my ass. I wore comfy purple high-top sneakers, and Mari had curled my hair—making me glad I'd just freshly dyed it yesterday along with my eyebrows.

She had on a tiny skirt and a slinky silk top along with heels that probably cost more than the average rent in Southside. I followed her dutifully across campus and up to the basketball gym on the far north side.

"Are we going to get shit for showing our faces at a school event?" I asked, not really caring but needing to gauge how much bullshit to prepare for.

She scoffed. "Has anyone given you *actual* shit when you're with me?"

"Nope," I replied, grinning. "You do come in handy."

We entered the gym to find it dimly lit save for the single large light fixture hanging from the ceiling that beamed its yellowy light down on a makeshift ring in the middle of the basketball court. The ring was comprised of a spacious area covered in thick sparring mats and enclosed by a circle of rowdy, mostly shirtless guys.

The stands were dotted with clusters of students shouting, cheering, and chatting excitedly amongst themselves. There were certainly a lot of girls here, each decked out like they were going to the club instead of watching dudes punch the shit out of each other in a sweaty gym.

Mari and I snuck onto the third row of a mostly empty bleacher near the entrance. We'd made it just in time to see Chad, sweaty and shirtless, his thick body inflated with muscle, as he slammed his hammy fists into another guy's face.

"Winner, Hendrickson!" Dane shouted into a bullhorn from his spot on the corner of the mat. His ginger hair shone under the gym light, and he had a whistle around his neck and a clipboard clasped in his other hand, so I supposed he was the master of ceremonies this evening. When Chad threw another punch into the barely conscious boy's face, Dane yelled, "Chad! He's done, for Christ's sake."

Chad finally bounced away from the guy, pumping his fists and crowing his victory. I watched him eye a group of girls in the stands near him before he decided to make a lewd gesture at them, causing them to gasp and giggle.

I vowed then that someday I would beat some respect for women—and people in general, really—into Chad Hendrickson.

"Up next, your main event!" Dane's falsetto blasted through the bullhorn. "In this corner, we have last summer's champion, John Tyler Ashmore!"

John Tyler stepped into the "ring," shaking out his shoulders and bouncing on his toes, a determined look on his face. The Ashmores were a Tier Two family, wealthy but not rub-elbows-with-the-Families wealthy, so it made some sense that John Tyler would try to make a name for himself in something like this. He was huge, with the build of a linebacker, and I bet his punches hurt like a bitch.

I didn't envy whoever was getting in the ring against him.

Dane got back on his horn. “And challenging JT is… the One. The Only. Your Ferrero Family Heir, Zachary!”

I jumped to my feet without a thought, my body moving on its own, and I stood on my seat to get a better view of my ex-best friend as he sauntered into the ring. Bennett and Noah appeared behind him in their business casual, taking their places near his corner and effectively clearing the space of any other bodies. They crossed their arms and looked on like they were here to make sure no bullshit was perpetrated against their boy.

Mari popped up next to me, balancing precariously on her stilettos. “Good idea. The Heirs rarely come to these—I guess it was time for them to blow off steam.”

“Them?” I asked as my eyes tracked Zach’s movements around the mat.

“I’ve heard Bennett fights. I don’t know about Noah.”

Interesting. Dom had always believed we should expect the Heirs to be well-trained because they absolutely had the resources to be, and they’d borne witness to exactly what can happen when one of the Families is caught unaware.

And now I would get to see their skills for myself.

John Tyler watched Zach with a blank look, and if he was nervous, he didn’t show it. Zach chose the next moment to rip his tight black T-shirt over his head, leaving him standing there in tiny training shorts and nothing else.

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry as the desert.

Zach was fucking beautiful.

His olive-toned skin was covered in colorful tattoos, sleeves of geometric patterns wrapping around his biceps and spreading across his broad, defined chest. The light caught the muscles in his torso just right, highlighting every ridge of his eight-pack and the deep V-cut of his Adonis belt before it disappeared into his shorts.

I couldn’t believe *that* was my scrawny, messy-headed former best friend.

“Weapons?” John Tyler asked, his voice matter-of-fact as it projected through the gym, and his question surprised me.

Zach barked out a laugh. “Ambitious of you, JT. Not this time. I’m feeling like using my fists tonight.”

Then Dane blew the whistle, and they were on each other.

I watched in equal parts awe and creeping dread as Zach beat the absolute shit out of John Tyler, who was several inches taller than Zach and probably had twenty pounds of muscle on him. Zach was on par with the best fighters I'd ever seen go through Dom's gym, including Max.

He would make a formidable opponent.

John Tyler finally tapped out, bleeding profusely from both his nose and a cut in his head, as Zach had him pinned to the mat and was choking the life out of him. Dane blew the whistle and called the fight for Zach.

The crowd roared, the girls screamed, and Zach beamed that cocky smile around the stands while he threw his arms out wide like he was the fucking Gladiator. When his dark eyes swept over where Mari and I stood, he paused, and I watched as he dragged his gaze slowly down the length of my long bare legs and then back up my body until our eyes met. He winked at me, and then he was back in his corner with Bennett and Noah, whom I had no doubt saw exactly where Zach's attention had snagged.

I only hoped no one else saw it, or else the target on my back was about to get even bigger, and I had shit to do.

CHAPTER EIGHT



"Hi, yes, hello," I said brightly to the disinterested security guard at the concierge desk in the lobby of Hargraves Tower. "I'm Annika Volkov. Just visiting my father and dropping off some coffee for his late night in the lab."

I smiled with all my teeth as I pushed my copy of Annika's Academy ID, doctored perfectly with my picture, toward the guard. I smoothed my pleated skirt and adjusted my pale pink sweater vest like I was making myself presentable for my father while the guard gave my ID a cursory look before shoving it back at me.

"Fifty-third floor," he intoned, bored, until he finally actually looked up at me, interest sparking in his eyes. He gave me a flirty smile before he said, "Have a nice night, miss."

I beamed back at him like he'd just made my whole day. "You too!" Then I flounced away, my borrowed high heels clicking on the shiny floor as I made my way to the elevator with my tray of coffees.

Mari thought I was borrowing her clothes to go to a Halloween party in Southside tonight dressed as "a rich bitch." Instead, I was breaking into Hargraves Tower by walking through the front door.

Max and his team hadn't had to dig very far through the information I'd pulled from Noah's laptop to find this week's security codes. Noah had most of his shit locked up in a way that had impressed even Max, but what might have been unhackable normally was easier to crack when I'd stolen it right from the source.

I stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the fifty-third floor. I spotted the security camera in the corner, and I waved to it so that my new friend would see I was thinking of him. When the doors opened, I found myself in the lobby of Eagle Pharmaceuticals, a star in the Hargraves portfolio and completely deserted at ten o'clock at night on a Saturday.

It was also conveniently located two floors below Peter Hargraves' private library and server room.

The few cameras placed around the company's hallways had already been looped, so I quickly made my way out onto the large balcony where the lab employees took their smoke breaks.

Once outside, I ditched my coffees and kicked off my shoes, then shoved them into my backpack. I hurried over to the side of the balcony and climbed onto the railing, annoyed that I was having to do this in a skirt.

I stuck to my planned route, reaching out with my bare foot and bracing it on the ledge of the large windowsill that was offset from the balcony at about the height of my shoulder. I used it to launch myself upward, grabbing the railing of the identical balcony on the floor above, then I swung my legs up and climbed over onto the next floor. I repeated the process one more time, clinging to the window ledge and then the balcony railing like a chimpanzee before finally hauling myself onto the smaller balcony just outside Peter Hargraves' private library located just one floor below the penthouse.

I smoothed my preppy outfit like it mattered how I looked during my first B&E, then I approached the balcony doors to enter this week's code onto the keypad next to them.

Before I could finish, the door swung open, revealing two large men dressed in black, weapons strapped to their bodies and matching smirks on their faces.

"What the fuck?" I shouted, jumping in surprise. "How did you two beat me up here?"

Max's grin widened. "I made a *friend* last night who worked for the caterer at last night's dinner party at Casa del Hargraves. We took a chance that his assigned code for the service elevator still worked."

Dom chuckled next to him.

I pouted, crossing my arms. “Both of you are *bullshit*. I just scaled two floors’ balconies in a fucking skirt!”

“What are you doing still standing outside, Jojo?” Dom asked, pasting a stern look on his face intended to rile me further. “Get in here. It’s time to work.”

I shouldered past them, grumbling, and they followed me down the narrow hall that we knew from studying the original building plans led to the library and server room.

Peter Hargraves’ private server was the first stop on my tour of where we had determined the Families’ kept their most sensitive information. I intended to leave here tonight with the security camera footage of that conference room many floors below us on the night of my parents’ murders.

When Dom first began explaining to me how we could possibly gather evidence that my parents had not in fact perished in a tragic plane crash in the Bahamas and had instead been killed by the other three Families, I’d thought it sounded nuts.

Why on earth would James, Andrea, and Peter hang on to a shred of evidence that would ruin their reputations and crumble the facade of the Shining City on the Hill that the Families had spent generations building and presenting to the rest of the world?

The apparent answer? Mutually assured destruction.

They would all have kept the evidence that implicated each other, ensuring that no one broke their little murder circle of trust.

We reached the library door, and I keyed in Noah’s code. The door clicked, unlocking, and we opened it slowly and crept inside with only Dom’s penlight for visibility. It was too dark to make out the details of the grand library, but I’d been in here once as a kid, and I remembered thinking it looked like the Beast’s library. Noah, Bennett, Zach, and I had snuck in behind Peter one evening when we were supposed to be in bed, and we’d hid in the stacks, laughing and reading curse words and sex scenes from grown-up books, and then we’d all fallen asleep there on one of the priceless Turkish rugs.

Noah’s nanny had found us the next morning and chewed us out, but we’d all thought the thrill of sneaking into places our parents labeled off-limits to us had been worth it.

I shook myself out of those memories. They gave me so little happiness and so much grief, as I could only mourn what I'd lost.

The server room was located off the far wall, and we entered with ease, using the same code. Then Dom and I stepped back while Max helped himself to the files stored there via his tablet and whatever magical cable he'd procured for the job.

After a long ten minutes, he gasped, "I think I've got it."

Dom and I peered over his shoulder. There, right on the screen in slightly grainy footage, were Peter and Andrea wandering into that conference room like they were headed to a boring meeting, flanked by their confused sons. James and Bennett entered a few minutes later.

"Oh, Jojo, don't look," Max whispered, now trying to block my view of the tablet.

But I had to see it. "No," I croaked. "Let me."

I forced myself to watch as the big, menacing Ferrero Enforcers dragged my struggling parents into that room, their bulk obscuring the view of the third Enforcer who would have been carrying unconscious eleven-year-old me. After several long, excruciating minutes, they emerged from the room, hefting the lifeless bodies of all three of us between them.

As expected, there was no camera footage of the actual murder—even the Families weren't that bold—but there was the proof that my parents were not in the Bahamas the night of their deaths and instead here in Hargraves Tower in the presence of the Families. We saw them being forced to enter the room against their will, and we saw them exiting in a manner that said they were either unconscious or dead.

I felt… nothing. It was as if the high of the victory that we were, at last, one step closer to getting what I needed to bring the Families to their fucking knees was cancelled out by the low of the horror of reliving my parents' last moments.

So, I was just numb. I'd cried my entire lifetime's worth of tears in that first week while I healed in Max's bed, and that was it. Never again.

There was only justice for my mom and dad.

Dom placed a soothing hand on my back before saying to Max, “Copy just what we need, then pack it up. We still have to get out of here.”

I brightened, looking forward to swapping the balcony hop for an easy ride down in the elevator and a quick waltz by the security guard with a wink and a wave, while Max made quick work of the file. Then he packed his shit, ensuring all evidence of us being here was wiped, and we made our way back out into the library and then down the hall toward the service elevators.

After stopping to slip my shoes back on, I rounded the corner and ran straight into Gifford Buckley—the Hargraves Family butler.

“What the hell,” he hissed, gaping at me as I stood there, trying to look innocent and confused.

Well, *shit*. Gifford rarely left the penthouse unless Peter needed something when he was down here, but we knew Peter was abroad this week, like he so often was.

Max and Dom apparently heard him, thank God, because they did not follow me around the corner and into the elevator bank, instead disappearing in the opposite direction.

Gifford barked at me, indignant, “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

I put on my haughtiest Harper Jansen face. “I don’t believe I’m required to explain anything to the *help*,” I spat. “But I am here to visit *Noah*. We have a date.”

“Mr. Hargraves is not in residence this evening,” he seethed. “And you are on the wrong floor.” He began fumbling with his cell phone, no doubt about to call security down here to haul me off to a dark room for questioning. “How did you even get in here?”

“Noah gave me the code, *obviously*,” I snapped, then I breathed a huge sigh of relief as a gun was cocked right behind Gifford’s bald head.

“Put the phone down, please, Mr. Buckley,” Dom said in a soothing voice.

He froze, both hands shooting into the air next to his face, his still-locked phone dangling from one of them.

“Now, listen carefully to what is about to happen,” Dom continued, calm as could be. “You are going to turn around and head

back to the penthouse, and you're going to forget everything you saw here."

"And why would I do that?" Gifford huffed.

Dom chuckled. "The gun pressed against your skull not enough reason for you?"

"I'm *loyal* to my Family," he sniveled. "They'll see you all executed for daring to steal from them!"

"Oh, that's interesting," I mused. "Isn't it, brother?"

Max stepped into view next to Dom, a wide smile on his face. "It is, indeed. I'd have to think that the Hargraves Family might also take issue with the fact that their *loyal* and trusted butler has been skimming off the Family accounts for years."

Gifford's face paled in the dim light of the elevator bank.

"I don't… I don't know what you're talking about."

"Save it, Buckley," I said. "It's our business to know everything that goes on in this Tower. We have your file, and we will turn it over to your beloved boss if we find out you've even *hinted* that something odd went on this evening."

Gifford swallowed, then nodded mutely.

"And I'm going to also throw in copies of your search history," Max added. "I'm not sure how long you'll have a job if it becomes public information that you get off to women crushing small animals to death with their feet."

Okay, disgusting—and not information I needed to know.

"Alright, yes," he said quickly, that little tidbit sealing the deal. "I'll be going. I saw nothing."

I reached out to pat his pervy chest. "Good boy. We'll be checking on you."

He retreated into the elevator like his ass was on fire.

After he was gone, I let my shoulders sag in relief. "Fuck, that was too close."

"I know," Dom replied. "But we've been prepared for this. You did great." He looked over at Max. "You both did."

"Thanks, Dom," I said. "Let's get the fuck out of here. Being back in the Family Towers is giving me hives."

"Hope you get over that," Max said with a laugh. "They'll all be yours soon."

I could only hope he was right.

CHAPTER NINE



"You guys! My father will kill us if we break something."

"Stop being a whiny baby, Bennett," I said, giggling.

"Yeah, we're just making space," Zach chimed in. "This blanket fort is gonna be killer."

"We should be careful, though," Noah added. He didn't like it when one of us was worried. "We don't want to get Bennett in trouble."

Zach and I pushed the coffee table over by the tall windows while Bennett watched us, making sure we didn't scratch the shiny wood floor. Noah dragged a chair over next to the sofa, then he started throwing blankets at all of us.

Zach and I piled our pillows in the empty space while Noah and Bennett draped blankets across the furniture.

"I'm sleeping by Jojo tonight," Bennett announced as he wedged himself in between Zach and me where we were laying on the floor in our blanket nest.

"No way. You slept next to her last weekend when we were at Noah's house," Zach griped.

"It's my house," he shot back. "I'm the best to protect her here."

"No one needs to protect me, you losers," I said with a huff. Then I shuffled over next to Noah, who grinned at me.

"You're the only girl," Bennett pointed out, as if that was a thing*.*

"Yeah, what if there's… a MONSTER!" Zach yelled before he tackled Noah and me both.

“Ahh!” I kicked at Zach, and then Bennett tackled him, and we all laughed and laughed.

“Bennett!”

We froze. Mr. Spencer was back early, and we had made a mess of his living room.

Bennett scurried out of the fort and jumped to his feet. “I’m sorry, Father. We’ll be quiet.”

I laid next to Zach and Noah as we listened to Mr. Spencer’s footsteps approaching. His shiny shoes appeared in front of the opening of our fort. He crouched down, and his dark eyes found me.

Suddenly, I felt my skin crawl.

He raised a gun and pointed it right at me. His hand was already covered in blood.

“Why, Father?” Bennett said, suddenly emotionless.

“For the Families,” he replied.

Then he pulled the trigger.

I woke up screaming.

Sitting up and sucking in air, it took me a long minute to realize I was in my bed inside my room in C Dorm. Not in a blanket fort at Bennett’s house. Not in my bunk back at home.

Not facing down the barrel of James Spencer’s gun.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and fumbled for my phone where it was charging on my nightstand.

“Fuck my life,” I groaned, seeing that its clock said it was only midnight.

It would be hours before I would be able to get back to sleep after yet another nightmare perverting my childhood memories, and I was going to be worthless during my early morning workout.

Decision made, I tossed my covers off and stumbled out of bed, pulling workout clothes on with the grace of a zombie. I tucked my cherry blossom necklace into the little safe I had hidden at the back of my closet like I usually did when I rowed, and then I crept quietly through the dorm halls and out onto the lawn, heading for the gym.

I was going to get my workout in now, rowing on the erg until I couldn’t breathe or think or move anymore, and then I would pass out until it was time for class.

It had been almost five days since the Hargraves Tower heist, and I was actually surprised the nightmare hadn't come earlier—like, that same night. My parents were killed in that fucking Tower, after all.

As expected, the gym was deserted, so after I scanned into the building with my ID, I made my way to the huge weight room. It was as large as the basketball court next door and had an indoor track circuiting the perimeter of the second story. Despite the late hour, the cavernous space was brightly lit by the gym's harsh fluorescent bulbs.

Since the gym was mine this evening, I plugged my phone into the docking station that connected to the room's speaker system, and I cranked up the volume on "Pretty Girl" by Sugarcult before hopping onto one of the sparkling new rowing machines.

And then I rowed. And rowed and rowed.

Fuck James Spencer.

Fuck Peter Hargraves.

Fuck Andrea Ferrero.

Fuck the Four Families.

Fuck their peons and sycophants and legions of lemmings who help them keep their boot on the neck of this City.

And fuck the Heirs. They were all the same.

Just as I was about to turn over a personal record for my 5K, pulling hard to "What It Is to Burn" by Finch, I heard the loud slam of a hand up against the wall as my music was suddenly cut off.

I jerked to a stop on my machine, drenched in sweat and panting hard. I turned to glare across the room, only to find Bennett, dressed in his long-sleeve crew T-shirt and short track shorts, holding the sound system's power cord in his hand and glaring at it like it'd insulted his mother.

Jumping to my feet, I stormed toward him.

"What the fuck, Spencer?" I barked, reaching out to grab the cord from him.

He yanked it out of my reach, the tall motherfucker.

"Turn that emo shit off," he growled at me. "Use those headphones you have constantly stuck in your ears if you want music. This is not your personal gym."

He dropped the cord and crossed his arms to give me his best intimidating stare. He'd shoved his sleeves to his elbows, his toned forearms flexing with the movement, and I hated that I noticed it.

"Or better yet," he went on. "Leave."

"Is that a command from the prince to his lowly subject?" I snarked, taking up a mirror power pose and meeting his angry stare. "Or is the grown man in front of me finished throwing a tantrum?"

He moved to step closer to me—too close—and I shoved my palm into the middle of his wide chest. "Back off, asshole," I snarled. "I am one of the few people in this City who is not afraid of you. Don't. Fuck. With. Me."

Then, out of nowhere, he smiled at me. A small one—just a quirk of the corners of his lips, and it both shocked the hell out of me and reminded me so much of young Bennett that my knees almost gave out.

"I don't *fuck* with people," he replied, removing my hand from his chest like it was a piece of lint on his shirt. "If I wanted to hurt you, you would know it. But the only person at this school that's hurting you is *you*. So, I will tell you again—fall in line and stop making trouble." Then he leaned in even closer, his lips brushing against my ear as he whispered, "And either put on your headphones, or get the fuck out of my gym."

Then he stepped quickly away and strode over to the rowers. He tossed his gym bag to the floor next to his chosen machine, then he hopped on and started pulling like he wanted to break it.

I'd finished my row, but I'd be damned if I'd let him run me out of the gym after that nonsense. After retrieving my own bag, I made my way to the nearby rack to get a few squats in. I looked over at Bennett still rowing like he hated the world, and I held his hard stare while I slowly stuck my earbuds in my ears. Then, for good measure, I ripped my sweaty tank top over my head, using it to wipe my face before tossing it aside and grabbing a barbell.

Bennett's eyes heated as he took me in, as I was now clad only in a strappy sports bra and spandex shorts, and the frown marring his pretty face intensified. I was being petty, but it served him right for being a dick to me while also flashing his forearms around and wearing what were definitely micro running shorts and *touching me*

with his fucking soft lips. If I had to look at those legs while hating him and everything he stood for, he could sit there during his rage row and be subjected to my ass in spandex.

I clicked my music on and tuned him out as I did my squats, and I felt his eyes on me the entire time. Once I finished, I packed my shit and left the gym without a backward glance, the whirring sounds of his machine still echoing through the huge room as he worked out whatever had crawled up his ass on this particular night.



"How are things with your parents?" I asked Mari the next morning over breakfast.

"The same," she replied, sighing into her coffee. "They're talking as if they'll disown me and make my second cousin the Anzaldua heir if I don't quit it with my *public exhibitionism*."

"The fuck?" I said around a mouthful of bagel. "Like, talking about your girlfriend on social media?"

"Yes. I know, it's very stupid." She waved a dismissive hand. "They hate my second cousin, so I'm not taking them seriously. Don't worry about me. You have enough going on."

I did worry about her, but her point was well taken. Chad had been hassling me a bit more as of late, and I could just *smell* the shit brewing with Harper, Lisa, and Annie. Those three were as high up the Tier One rung as Mari was and weren't quite as susceptible as their peers to being frightened away with just an angry "go fuck yourself"—in English or Spanish, depending on her mood.

I parted ways with my only friend and found an empty desk in the quiet back corner of the Leadership Seminar classroom. I'd just pulled up the assigned reading on my tablet and was sorting through my notes when the three stooges filed into the row right in front of me.

"Morning, Princess," Zach sang at me before throwing himself into his chair, hair sexily disheveled and tie hanging loose around his neck, per usual.

Noah slid into the seat next to him before turning to give me a warm-but-patronizing smile over his shoulder. “Hey, Joanna. How’s it going?”

“Swell, Noah,” I replied, scribbling on my notes. “Another great day at Holywell.”

Bennett scowled at his buddies like they were misbehaving by acknowledging me at all before he sat gracefully into his own seat. His suit was navy today, and I wondered how much his cufflinks cost.

“Get all those demons exorcised last night, Spencer?” I asked lightly, flipping another page in my notes.

Zach and Noah both turned to stare at him with raised eyebrows. He blew out an annoyed breath before throwing an arm over the back of his chair and turning to stare me down. “Yes, thank you. The little show you put on was amusing as well.”

“Dude, what—”

“Please,” I scoffed, cutting Zach off. “Don’t tell me an Heir of the Four Families could possibly be distracted by a pair of underwhelming tits in a sports bra and a little spandex.”

“Bennett, what in the world—”

“Your tits are *not* underwhelming, Princess—”

Now Bennett was *smirking* at me. “I’m sure that move worked really well for you when you were picking up what I’m sure were *numerous* unsuspecting boys on the Southside, but it takes a little more than a great ass in spandex to *distract* me.”

“Oh, are we slut shaming the poor Southside girl?” I drawled. “How original. And rich coming from a guy who apparently exclusively fucks hookers at the Euphoria Club. I bet you’re into levels of kink that us normals could never even *fathom*.”

Zach barked out a very loud laugh, and I was pretty sure the entire class was now turned in our direction. They wouldn’t be able to hear the details of our conversation, but they sure could see all three Heirs now turned around in their seats and staring at yours truly.

“Let me guess…,” I went on because I was an idiot. “Choking? That’s your thing, isn’t it, Spencer? No, I bet it’s… restraints. Yeah, you like to leave marks.”

“Oooh, she’s got you there, dude,” Zach said, laughing.

Noah now wore an amused smile. “What the hell did you two get up to last night?”

“Nothing,” we both said, then Bennett gave me one last heated, angry look before he finally turned around to face the front.

Class dragged on for ninety long minutes during which the Heirs went back to steadfastly ignoring me, to my immense relief. As everyone began to pack their shit to leave, I hung back, pretending to scroll aimlessly on my tablet while I observed Zach digging around in his thousand-dollar leather messenger bag.

Before I could get clear confirmation of exactly where he kept his key ring, Lisa and Harper appeared in the now empty row in front of the Heirs. Lisa hopped up on the tabletop and crossed her legs, her pointy nude Mary Jane heels clicking with the movement and her short white skirt now riding up, nearly exposing her panties. She smiled at all of the Heirs before her cunning gaze zeroed in on Zach.

Harper’s tight periwinkle suit dress wasn’t going to allow her to flaunt herself at Bennett in the same manner, so she leaned casually against the front of their table, angling herself a bit so that all three of them could get a nice peek at her cleavage.

I rolled my eyes and failed to rein in my snort of derision.

“You’re dismissed, Southside trash,” Lisa drawled, waving a hand at me. “You’ve polluted the air around the Heirs long enough today.”

I ignored her, rummaging in my backpack for a second before I exclaimed, “Oh, there it is—thank God. Here you go, Lisa.” I pulled my hand out and gave her the middle finger.

“Classy, as usual,” Lisa spat. “Zach… *Zach*.”

Zach had turned around to smirk at me again, but Lisa screeching his name finally got him to pay attention to her. “What’s up, Lisa?”

“You guys are coming to the Academy’s fall party at The Revelry tomorrow night, right? I’ve had the best VIP booth reserved for the Heirs, of course.”

The Revelry was a ritzy bar and intimate concert venue in the vast portfolio of the Aviano Family. Mari had mentioned that the Academy usually rented a private venue for its fall party, but I’d told her I’d rather give Harper Jansen a bikini wax than go to an Academy party.

However, if I got confirmation that Zach was going, then it might be worth checking out.

He was, after all, my next target.

“Yeah, we’ll be there,” he told her, sounding more bored than excited. “The Families prefer that we make an appearance at all Academy-sponsored events.”

“Excellent,” she said with a little clap.

“I’m looking forward to seeing you there, Bennett,” Harper cooed. “We haven’t been able to spend much time together since our parents have been… negotiating.”

Bennett had returned to his default setting—aloof and disinterested. “I’m sure my father will set something up for us should negotiations progress, Harper.” He stood up, motioning for the other two to join him. “But we’ll see everyone tomorrow night.”

He glanced at me one more time, and I met his fierce stare with the same bravado that I had last night—because fuck him. His jaw tensed, nostrils flaring ever so slightly, and then he just *had* to lean into my space, placing his palms flat on the desk in front of me before whispering, “Keep dreaming about what you think my *kinks* are, Miss Miller. Because that’s the closest you’ll ever get to finding out.”

Then he turned and strode down the stairs behind his boys.

“Thanks a lot, dickhead,” I muttered, feeling the incredulous, angry vibes that were now being directed at me as I finished packing up.

“Stay away from the Heirs, you garbage whore,” Harper hissed at me.

“It is just astounding to me that you dare to speak to them,” Lisa added, incensed. “You are *so* far beneath them. They should just crush you like the cockroach you are.”

I stood up, slinging my backpack onto my shoulders. “See you ladies later. Good luck trying to convince your chosen Heirs to fuck you. I don’t get the appeal, but to each her own, you know?”

Ignoring their scandalized tittering, I hurried down the stairs and out the door, ready to be finished with privileged assholes for the day.

CHAPTER TEN



"I still can't believe you changed your mind about this," Mari said as we exited the train two blocks from The Revelry. "Not that I'm complaining, but you tend to stick to your guns about things. Are you sick?"

"You're thinking too hard, girl," I said, sounding flippant even though I was extremely serious—Mari did not need to be thinking too hard about my motivations for a lot of things. "How often does a girl from the Southside get to party at The Revelry? I'll put aside my convictions for a night."

"Fine. I vote you also put aside this celibacy thing you have going on. Find a hot bartender to ride for the night."

"Stop projecting your sexual frustrations onto me."

"*Joder*, I know. One cannot survive on FaceTime sex alone."

I chuckled as we rounded the corner and approached the entrance to The Revelry, closed tonight for a private party just for the students of Holywell Academy. The club was housed inside a remodeled old theatre, the neon lights of the marquee blazing with "The Revelry" in large turquoise block letters. The bouncer stood just outside the old-fashioned theatre box office, and I spied about a dozen of my classmates standing in line to enter.

"I'm very glad you let me dress you tonight, chica," Mari said as we took our spots at the back of the line. She eyed the girls ahead of us, most of them wearing high-end designer cocktail dresses. "Even if you are essentially still wearing *shorts*."

“It’s a romper,” I argued. It was simple and black, but the shorts barely covered my ass and the neckline plunged low between my B-cups. “And I wore heels for you.”

“Those are wedged sneakers,” she retorted, rolling her eyes.

“Exactly!”

She huffed at me, failing to contain her smile. She looked bangin’ in her bright-red cropped top with a matching skirt, its high slit showing a lot of leg while the top allowed a peek of her flat stomach. She also wore the most uncomfortable-looking strappy stilettos, but I was pretty sure Mari came out of the womb walking on five-inch heels.

After showing our Academy IDs to the bouncer, we entered the club. The lighting was dim, of course, and I paused to really take in the room.

It was gorgeous, and it truly pained me to admit that about anything connected to Lisa or the Ferreros.

The ornate ceiling remained from the original theatre as did the stage all lit by purple-hued lighting that was arranged throughout the club. The old chandeliers remained as well, and they glowed a bright contrasting orange. There were sleek tables surrounded by plush leather chairs scattered throughout the club’s wide-open floor, and velvet couches were set along walls and around low tables in quiet corners. The expansive bar was tucked up under the old balcony and took up the entire left wall. The small balcony floor contained additional seating and the VIP areas.

The room was crowded, and I recognized almost everyone in attendance as a fellow Academy student. I also recognized a few of the waitstaff and two of the members of the cover band currently commanding the stage as current or former attendees of Southside High.

Mari held tightly to my hand and dragged me toward the bar. “Say what you will about the City,” she shouted over the music, “but the fact that the drinking age is eighteen within City limits is pretty awesome.”

“It keeps us complacent,” I yelled back at her, though I fully planned to take advantage of the lax drinking laws while being forced to party with my classmates.

We arrived at the bar, and it took Mari exactly fifteen seconds to have the very interested eyes of the girl working on our end. She had something fruity in hand for Mari immediately, and soon after she passed me the gin and tonic I ordered because it was Dom's favorite.

I turned to lean up against the bar, surveying the room and instantly locating the Heirs because the best VIP booth was easily identified.

It was a private viewing box of old, jutting out from the wall slightly lower than the balcony and just to the left of the stage. A wide plush loveseat and another roomy chair surrounded a low table piled high with bottles of liquor.

My three marks sat around the table—Zach and Noah on the loveseat and Bennett on his solitary throne—lazily drinking from crystal tumblers and watching the festivities below with only mild interest. They all wore expertly fitted custom suits, and they'd apparently decided to cut loose tonight because none of them wore a tie, leaving a few shirt buttons undone instead.

"Ugh, fuck this place. Fuck *everything*," a voice slurred from nearby, tearing my attention away from my former best friends.

Hannah Langford was seated on a high barstool at the corner of the bar, sequined pantsuit looking pristine while the rest of her looked… very drunk. Her dark red hair was coming loose from what had probably once been a very sleek ponytail, and she'd already smudged her mascara at some point tonight. She squinted at her drink like it was confusing the hell out of her.

"Hey, Langford," I said, floating in her direction out of sheer curiosity. "What's with the booze bath?"

She looked up, squinting again like she was trying to figure out who I was, and then she laughed. "Perfect! Just the person I need right now." She motioned me closer. "My fucking parents think I need a *course correction* on my dating life." She lifted her hands to do some air quotes but abandoned ship when her stool started to wobble. "They want to negotiate a marriage contract for me like it's the fucking stone ages. And fucking *Chad* is on their list."

"Oh, God," I exclaimed, truly horrified.

“I know! See, I knew *you* would understand.” She sighed, dejected, and I didn’t blame her. Hannah was not my friend, but she had left me alone, never getting involved in shit that had been done to me by her friends, so she was sort of okay in my book.

She didn’t deserve to be subjected to Chad, at least.

I leaned in to whisper conspiratorially, “Do you want me to kill him for you?”

She perked up. “You can do that?”

Mari must have overheard us, because she entered the conversation. “No, *por el amor de Dios,* she’s joking, Langford. Get it together!”

“Am I, though?” I asked innocently.

Hannah hiccupped, still looking morose, and she pointed a wobbly finger at me. “Hey, Miller. You need to be careful tonight. The girls are plotting. Watch your back.”

Not exactly a revelation, but I appreciated her efforts. “Thanks, Langford. You, uh… take it easy, okay?”

She nodded, waving us away. Mari and I scooted further down the bar, settling in to watch the band. We were just in time too, because a familiar face had just hopped on stage for a guest performance.

Mari gasped. “Is that…?”

I grinned. “Yep.”

The opening notes of “Dancing’s Not a Crime” by Panic at the Disco played, and Max began belting the lyrics into the microphone, his voice smooth and his range rivaling that of Brendon Urie himself.

“I got him into this band!” I shouted at Mari. “I got my first album when I was, like, a year old!”

She gaped at Max, probably rethinking her stance on dick for a hot second, and one look around the room told me she was not alone.

Max was dressed in a simple black T-shirt and tight black jeans, ostensibly on the catering staff tonight, but he still looked and sang like a rock star. Girls *and* guys watched him in awe as he sang and danced to the upbeat tune, and I made a mental note to threaten him with actual castration if he stuck his dick in any hole belonging to one of the jerks I went to school with tonight.

“He’s so good!” Mari yelled, swaying to the beat.

I decided to join her, and for a moment I had… a wonderful time. I closed my eyes and focused on Max’s fantastic voice as he slayed one of my favorite songs, feeling the music as I moved. For a moment, it was just Max, and me, and the song—no mission, no marks, no Families, no rich dicks making my life harder.

And it was as if that last thought had summoned them.

As Max’s song wound down, I opened my eyes to find Noah and Zach at the bar a few feet away, neither of them hiding the fact that they’d just been staring at me. A quick glance back up at their VIP booth told me King Bennett had remained on his throne and was keeping an eye on us.

Mari had wandered away into the crowd to dance, so I was on my own.

“See, man, I told you they teach them how to *dance* on the Southside,” Zach said, nudging Noah. “Princess is gonna show our refined top Tier ladies how it’s done.”

“She is going to do no such thing,” I retorted, back to leaning on the bar and keeping my eyes on the band. “Go back to your tower. It must be suffocating for you both down here among the plebs.”

“Come on, Joanna,” Noah chided, taking the entire bottle of top-shelf vodka that had just been handed to him by the bartender. “Play nice with us. We’re all here to have fun.”

Says you, Noah.

I gave them both an unimpressed stare, and I watched as their twin smiles slowly vanished, replaced by pursed lips and narrowed eyes aimed at something behind me.

“Hey, Jojo,” Max whispered in my ear as he threw his arms around me. “How’d you like my song? I think I’m better than the original at this point.”

I turned to grin at him. “Perfection, as always, Maxy.”

“Who’s your friend, Princess?” Zach interjected, suddenly very serious.

Max chuckled as I sighed in frustration, glancing over at the two of them again with a look that said they were on my last nerve.

“These guys bothering you, Joanna?” Max asked loudly, then he placed a sweet kiss to my temple while he stared them both down.

Noah had forced a smile back onto his face. “No one is bothering her. I’m Noah *Hargraves*. Nice to meet you.”

Max, bless him, ignored that flex and continued to act like he had no clue who they were. “Cool, bro. Do you guys go to school with my cousin?”

That got their hackles down—slightly—though Zach still eyed Max’s muscular arm where it was slung across my shoulders like he wanted to cut it off.

“You don’t look like cousins.”

Great, Bennett had descended from on high. He appeared next to Zach, bringing his broody energy with him, and his suspicious stare was aimed at Max.

Max just laughed, desensitized long ago to the power of the Heirs, having lived with one for seven years. “She’s my mom’s niece. I take after my dad.”

“Not that it is any of their business,” I reminded him, glaring at the guys.

“True, true,” Max replied, dismissing three of the most powerful people in the City in an instant as he turned his back on them. He whispered in my ear, “Now’s the time—Spencer’s left the VIP booth. I saw Ferrero arrive with his bag, so I’m going to sweep the booth while you distract them. Get out on the dance floor, babe.”

Then he smirked at something over my shoulder before shoving me into someone’s waiting arms. “On your break, Jennings?”

Internal groan. *Max, what the fuck?*

I looked up to find Matt Jennings, an attractive, nice guy I knew from Dom’s gym and had maybe hooked up with once, staring down at me like I was the sunshine in a storm. “Hi, Joanna. Do you maybe… want to dance?”

“Um, sure, Matt,” I replied. I’d known Max had an inside hookup with tonight’s catering staff, but he failed to inform me that hookup was *Jennings*. “I can manage a few songs.”

He beamed at me. “Great! I only have ten minutes before I have to be back in the kitchen, anyway.”

He led me out into the middle of the club, holding fast to my hand as we weaved through the throngs of writhing, sweaty bodies. We reached an open space right out in the middle of everyone, and Matt

tugged me into his body as we began to dance to the sultry beat of the band's cover of a Billie Eilish song.

My back was to his front, giving me a full, unobstructed view of the room. Max had disappeared into thin air the second he'd offloaded me onto Jennings, and knowing him, he'd already been in and out of the VIP booth with no one being the wiser.

The Heirs were still at the bar, a crowd of girls wearing the world's tiniest dresses now surrounding them and vying for their attention, but it didn't escape me that their stares continued to wander in our direction. We certainly made quite the couple, Matt in his black catering uniform and me in my little black romper adrift in a sea of sparkly wealth, two Southside kids possessing the rhythm and a degree of shamelessness the kids from the upper crust rarely did.

I turned to face him, done with my former best friends for the night, and I threw my arms around his neck. "Thanks, Matt. This is nice."

"We miss you around the gym, you know," he replied, staring into my eyes with a hint of longing. "*I* miss you."

"Ah, well, you know I'll be back around for the holidays," I said, attempting to keep it light and friendly. Jennings was very nice and definitely cute, but I was a one-and-done type of girl.

"I was hoping—"

"You were hoping to get back to doing your *job*," a familiar voice boomed from behind him, and I tensed. "Beat it, I'm cutting in."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



"Excuse me?" Jennings exclaimed. "Just who do you think you—"

Zach stepped into the light next to us, and Matt's eyes went comically wide.

"Oh, shit, are you…?"

"Zach Ferrero. Now fuck off."

Even Matt's infatuation with me was no match for the fear of the Four Families that had been ingrained in every citizen, and he scurried off without a backward glance.

I whirled on Zach. "That was unnecessary, you dick."

Zach just shot me his sexy smirk before yanking me into his hard body by my hips. He was still wearing his dark gray suit jacket, and his shirt was unbuttoned low enough that the top of his toned, tattooed chest was on display. His black hair was artfully messy, and his dark eyes glinted with mischief.

"Quit hanging out with the help, Princess. You're supposed to be rising above all of that now as a Holywell student."

I let him pull me in close as we started to grind against each other, his hips moving expertly to the beat. I didn't even fight him when he ran his big hands up my arms and then placed them around his neck. After all, the longer he was distracted, the better.

That's all this was.

You lying liar, Jolie.

“You’re a prick,” I told him, for good measure, except that my voice came out all low and breathy.

“I sure am,” he purred, his lips brushing against my ear. “And yet you’re still here, letting me put my hands on you.” Those hands dipped lower on my body, just brushing the top of my ass. He stopped short of copping a feel, so I didn’t have to break his hand.

“For now,” I replied, ignoring the fluttering in my belly that had been decidedly absent when I danced with Matt.

We continued to move, pressed tight together, for several long, hot minutes. The low purple lighting didn’t allow me to see much further than a few feet in either direction, so for now, my world was entirely Zach. He smelled clean, with a hint of something citrusy, and the rush of being so close to him, of being *held* by him—my old friend, the Ferrero Heir—was heady.

Finally, I spied Max moving casually through the crowd like he was on his way to the kitchen, and he gave me a surreptitious thumbs up before he disappeared again. I let out a relieved sigh, accidentally tightening my arms around Zach’s neck and pulling him closer, eliciting a pleased little growl from him.

I decided I could *suffer* through this for a little bit longer now that I knew Max had successfully grabbed what we needed from Zach’s bag.

Zach kept exactly two things on his key ring, which I’d observed that he usually carted around in his bag rather than in his pants pocket. The first was the key fob to his Ferrari. The second was an old brass key that unlocked the door to the hidden basement at the Euphoria Club. Only Andrea, her bodyguard, and a few select top-ranked Ferrero Enforcers had a copy.

Max now had a mold of that key, which meant I would have an exact replica by tomorrow.

“I don’t think Mom and Dad approve of your behavior,” I said into Zach’s ear as the band began its rendition of “Style” by Taylor Swift. I motioned to the VIP box high above us where Bennett and Noah had returned, both watching us intently, their frowns visible from all the way down here.

He cast a quick look up at his best friends before giving them a smirk and the finger. “I am breaking the rules a little bit,” he

whispered, rubbing his rough cheek against mine. “But I can’t help it. You look fucking hot tonight. You always wear the simplest shit and manage to look sexier than anyone else.”

“Which rule are you breaking?” I asked, turning in his arms, backing my ass right up against his body, and slinging an arm around his neck. “Don’t fraternize with the Southside trash?”

He chuckled, now running his lips up and down the column of my throat that was totally exposed to him because I’d opted for my usual ponytail tonight. I felt the cool touch of his lip ring and his hot breath on my skin as his hands returned to their firm grip on my hips. He murmured, “Something like that.”

I refused to think about how damp my panties were at this point. Zach was hot, he could dance like sin, and he’d always feel just a little bit like home to me.

The home I’d had before the Families stole it from me.

I caught Mari’s wide-eyed stare from out in the crowd where she was dancing in a group of some of the more pleasant scholarship students. I shot her a tight smile, which she returned with a “what the fuck do you think you’re doing” look.

“It really is too bad, all these rules,” Zach went on, still purring in my ear as he held me. “Otherwise, I’d love to see how these hips move while you’re writhing on my cock.”

I used all of my strength to bite back a moan. My goofy friend Zach had grown up to be *dirty* hot, and it was about to melt my brain.

“But it’s not to be,” he continued with a dramatic sigh. “The Heirs do have certain… standards.”

And record scratch. *Good—time to wake the fuck up, Jolie*.

I knew he could feel my smile up against his cheek. “Yes, well, I understand. I also have standards.” With one smooth, practiced motion, I freed myself from his embrace and threw my elbow into his ribs.

“Ow, *fuck*,” he growled.

“Never touch me again, you egotistical shithead.”

“Oh, come on, Princess—”

I marched away from him. “Nope.”

My work here was done, anyway.

I was going to hit the bathroom, and then I was going to find Mari and convince her it was time to leave this leech-infested hellhole.

When I located the ladies' room, I found it was, unsurprisingly, a whole lot fancier than was really necessary for a bathroom. It had rich hunter-green carpeting, golden vessel sinks shaped like seashells that sat atop white marble counters, and a rose-gold chaise lounge sat in the corner in case any of us were feeling faint. Someone flushed the toilet in one of the closed stalls behind where I stood at the ornate mirror, and even that sounded dainty.

Having already done my business, I reapplied my nude lip stain and righted my ponytail, then I made my way back out into the dim corridor, on the hunt for Mari.

I hadn't taken three steps into the hallway when something heavy cracked against my skull, and everything went black.



The first thing I noticed when I came to was the same green carpet that was in the bathroom. I was on my back, my head absolutely pounding, and I could feel the drip of warm liquid down the side of my face and pooling in the wet carpet under my head.

Slowly, using every ounce of my remaining strength, I pulled myself up to sitting. It was then that I noticed that my right hand had been handcuffed to the top pipe of what I'd soon discover was an old radiator, forcing my limp arm to hang above my head.

"Shhh, she's awake," I heard Lisa hiss as I fought to open my eyes.

Goddamn it. Everything I'd done, all the preparations and the training, and I let Lisa fucking Aviano get the drop on me.

"Your mom is going to kill you." That was Harper. "Look at all the blood staining her carpet."

I finally forced my eyes open and found myself in an office that was professionally decorated and staged as if it were in a magazine. There was a large wooden desk, two rose-gold chairs in front of it that matched the bathroom chaise, and colorful artwork adorning the

walls. Fresh flowers were arranged in a crystal vase on an understated side table.

I was slouched against the side wall next to the radiator, now looking up into the smug faces of Lisa, Harper, and Annie.

Lisa stepped closer, crouching down to my level to crow at me. “I’m sure you were very pleased with your little display out there. I bet you think you have some kind of pull on Zach, and he’s going to be your ticket out of your slum life and straight to the top.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “Get a grip, Aviano. If Zach wanted to fuck you, he would fuck you. Taking your insecure bullshit out on me is not going to change that fact.”

She screeched and aimed a slap at my face, which I caught before impact with my free hand, squeezing her bony wrist as hard as I could as she cried out. At least my reflexes were coming back online.

“Look,” I said, wincing at the pain that rattled through my head with every word I spoke. “I feel like shit right now, and I’m down an arm, but I will still beat your ass. Step away from me.”

She yanked her hand away and scurried backward on her pointy heels. She took up her place again next to Harper and Annie, who were now watching me warily. Lisa smoothed her tight white dress, regaining her composure, and then she pulled a silver key from her tiny purse.

“This is the key to this office,” she said, holding it high. “We’re leaving and locking the door. Then we’ll be heading back out to the party to sell this key to the highest bidder.” She pretended to look it over, like she was studying its little nooks and crannies. “I wonder how much a shot at slum pussy will net me?”

Great. I was going to have to kill someone tonight.

My head pounded harder.

Harper trotted happily over to the desk a few feet away from me. She cracked open the sleek silver laptop that had been sitting on top of it, and she positioned it so that the computer’s camera would be facing my spot on the floor.

“Just a little livestream that we’ll make sure the Heirs have a link to,” she tittered happily. “Not that we don’t all know you’re slutty trash, but sometimes it’s good to have some solid evidence. The

Academy doesn't look too kindly on public lewdness, either. With any luck, you'll be expelled."

I said nothing. I slipped my free hand into the pocket of my romper, predictably finding that my phone was missing.

"Looking for this?" Annie sang at me, holding up my phone. Then, in a feat of strength that actually surprised me, she hurled it against the opposite wall, and it shattered on impact. "Oh, no—that's unfortunate."

It *was* unfortunate. Dom was going to have to procure me a new one with all the special software we used, and that was going to make him grouchy.

"Are you three done?" I griped, trying to wipe some of the blood off of my face. "I get the picture. Better get going on your evil mission."

"We're not kidding, you dumb bitch," Harper barked. "We're going to make sure this key goes to someone with very *flexible* morals."

They wanted me to cry and beg and plead with them. They wanted to see me break, and they wanted it on camera.

I would never give them that.

"Well, that won't be hard with this group," I said with a lazy shrug.

"Ugh, let's go," Lisa whined. "It's like arguing with a toddler."

I watched as they filed out, whispering to each other before slamming the door behind them. The telltale sound of the lock engaging followed, which meant I had some quick decisions to make.

While I'd reluctantly left my backpack behind in my dorm, I still had a small knife in my shoe and a few pins in my hair.

The camera was a fucking problem, though.

I let out a loud sigh to seem like I was frustrated, and I ran my hand over the bloody, swollen wound on the side of my head, pulling the pins from my hair in the same movement. I yanked on the handcuff like I was testing it, then I groaned in exasperation, turning toward my restrained hand and putting my back between it and the camera.

I mimed like I was pulling at it some more. "Come on! Break, you stupid thing!"

All the while, I inserted the pin in my free hand into the lock, popping it open with a few quick motions. I kept the cuffs where they were, connected to the radiator, as I slowly got to my feet to wait.

My head pounded, and I was going to need to lay down soon.

After a few minutes, the sounds of the key being inserted into the office door and the lock turning gave me the shot of adrenaline I needed to focus and ignore the pain.

The door opened, and a guy I vaguely recognized as a fellow Academy student entered before closing the door and locking it behind him. He was shorter, maybe my height, and he was thick and brawny like Chad. He had close-cropped brown hair and a short, neat beard. His beady eyes took me in eagerly.

Since I didn't immediately know him, he must've been a Tier Two unknown trying to impress his superiors.

"Holy shit," he said, barking out a laugh. "They really weren't kidding. It's the Southside slut, finally getting put where she belongs. I'm so glad I outbid Chad for that key."

I stared at him with a blank look before turning to look right into the camera lens on the laptop. I lifted my sneakered foot, my legs thankfully long enough to reach the desk, and I slammed my shoe into the laptop screen, breaking the camera and ending the livestream.

"Damn, they'll be pissed you did that," the idiot said as he crept closer, leering at me.

"Yeah?" I said, finally acknowledging him. "You disappointed your crimes won't be recorded for the world to see?"

He chuckled darkly. "Baby, there's no such thing as a crime when you're one of *us*."

Well, that was mostly true.

"Oh?" I said, squaring up to him as much as possible while still pretending to be chained to the radiator. "That's good news, then, because when they're dragging your body out of here, I'd rather not be hassled by the cops."

"Funny," he drawled, still advancing on me. "Just behave, and this might even be good for you."

I snapped my hand out of the cuff, and his eyes widened.

"Oh, I think this is actually going to be *very* good for me."

And then I attacked.

CHAPTER TWELVE



By the time Max had picked the lock on the office door and burst inside with Mari rushing in behind him in a panic, they'd missed most of the fun.

They found me on the floor, straddling the would-be-rapist asshole and pinning his arms down with my knees while I pounded on his barely conscious face.

Had I cheated a bit by pulling my knife from my shoe as I baseball slid underneath him and slashed at his Achilles tendon right off the bat? Maybe, but I hadn't really been in the mood to fuck around.

He'd screamed like he was dying, I'd tackled him to the ground, and here we were.

I rammed my fist into his nose, feeling the satisfying crunch of it breaking as he groaned and gurgled, then I looked up. "Hey," I said to Max, panting. "I didn't know you were still here."

"*Hey*," he repeated, crossing his arms and giving me an incredulous look. "That's what you have to say to me right now? *Hey?*"

"What?"

"Chica, why don't you just… take a little break," Mari said gently, walking over to me and offering her hand. "Max can finish this up."

I stared at her, frowning at her worried face. "I'm fine, girl. He didn't touch me." I grabbed her hand to pull myself up to standing but abandoned that plan when the room spun.

“Uh-huh,” she cooed at me like I was a petulant child. “Let’s just sit down over here. I think you have a concussion.”

“Mmm, probably,” I muttered. I rolled off the bleeding creep and set about finding a comfy spot on the floor with my back resting against the desk.

“Is he dead?” Mari whispered to Max who was poking at the guy with his boot.

“Nah, but he’s gonna wish he was.”

Max bent over and threw two more hard punches right into the guy’s head before he stood up, raised his heavy combat boot, and stomped down hard right on the guy’s dick. The asshole moaned before his eyes rolled back in his head, and he finally passed out.

“Sorry we weren’t here earlier,” Mari said as she eyed the carnage with a clinical detachment that impressed me. “I only caught the whispering that Donavan here had purchased the opportunity to ‘have some fun with the Southside girl’ after he’d already disappeared.”

“You should’ve seen the look on the kitchen staff’s faces when she barged in there, swearing up a storm, *demanding* they hand me over,” Max added.

I smiled ruefully at them. “Sorry to worry you both. I’m pretty sure Lisa beamed me in the head with the heavy crystal potpourri bowl from the bathroom. How embarrassing.”

“Max assured me you’ve had some….” Mari paused, shooting me a pointed look. “*Self-defense* training.”

I shrugged. “It can be rough in our neighborhood.”

Max, who had been fucking with the broken laptop, turned to look down at me. “Let’s get you home to Dad to get cleaned up—”

“What the fuck happened in here?”

Damn it. That voice had interrupted my activities already once this evening. Quickly, I shoved my torn-up, bloody knuckles into the pocket of my romper.

Zach stormed into the office with Noah and Bennett right on his heels. They all pulled up short as they crossed the threshold, staring at the pile of bloody flesh that was Donavan with looks of surprise, or in Bennett’s case, disgust.

“Oh, you didn’t hear?” I asked, tonelessly. “Your girlfriend sold my *slum pussy* to this guy.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” Zach replied, distracted as he took in the situation on the floor.

“Somebody better tell her that,” Mari muttered.

“Are you hurt?” Noah asked me, taking a few strides in my direction before Max stepped right into his path, blocking him from getting any closer to me.

“Do I look hurt, Noah?” I asked wryly.

“Yes,” he bit out, now glaring at Max. “Call off your guard dog so I can check you for a concussion.”

I definitely had a concussion. “No, thank you.”

“Joanna—”

“She said no, dude,” Max said with a dangerous smile. “Back off.”

I watched with mild interest as the two of them began a testosterone-fueled stare off while Zach circled Donavan’s body and Bennett, still bored as ever, was typing rapidly on his phone.

“You do this?” Zach asked Max, a *hint* of respect in his tone. “Pretty fucking brutal.”

Max gave Noah one last shitty smile before glancing at Zach with a shrug. “That’s how we treat sexual predators on the Southside. Were you guys coming in here to give him some high-fives and bro-hugs for a job well done?”

Bennett glanced up from his phone, irritation breaking through his stony façade. “It is not our job to police what the lower tiers do unless it is a direct issue for the Four Families. But now that you all have made a giant mess of things, we’ll have to deal with it. This is an Academy event, which means it is a Family event.”

“Oh, gosh, we *do* apologize for the mess, Your Highness,” I grumbled. “Take it up with Ferrero—his little display on the dance floor hurt his girlfriend’s feelings and caused all of this.”

Zach scoffed, he and Noah having returned to Bennett’s side where all three of them were now staring down their noses at us. “Not even Lisa is dumb enough to think my dancing with you meant anything.”

For a moment, I was glad for the pain in my head distracting me from feeling literally anything else because that was dangerously

close to a direct hit.

“Maybe it’s time for you to reconsider your position on remaining at Holywell,” Bennett added. “Your presence is causing more trouble than it's worth, and we are not going to continue to clean up after you.”

Mari, seated next to me on the floor, squeezed my hand but remained silent. I understood it.

Max, however, did not have the same sense of self-preservation.

“The next one of you that opens your mouth to insult my cousin is going to get the same treatment as the sack of shit on the floor.”

“Max!” Mari hissed. “*¡Cállate la boca!*”

I groaned and began the arduous process of standing up. I was not in the mood for another fight, but I’d be damned if I let any of them touch a hair on Max’s head.

Zach had stepped forward, a feral smile on his face, but Bennett stuck an arm out, halting his advance. “Out. All of you.” He looked at Mari, presumably because she was the only one of us that would take orders from him. “See that she gets medical care. Cover it if necessary, and we’ll make sure you’re reimbursed.”

Mari nodded, hopping to her feet and moving to steady me.

“I don’t need your charity,” I hissed at Bennett because I was now in a terrible mood.

Max rushed to hold my other side, and the three of us made our way toward the door. At the threshold, I cast one last glance behind us into the room. Bennett and Zach were now conferring, heads together and whispering as they looked over the mess, but Noah had turned to watch us leave.

His blue eyes met mine, and it was disappointment that lurked there behind his dark frames. I shook my head and turned away before he could see how disappointed I was in them too.



For the next week, I recovered at home. I was up to speed with all of my classwork, and my professors (including my Tech Skills TA, Noah Hargraves) and my coach, Janet, were sympathetic to my plight of

needing to nurse a concussion I received when falling down the stairs at my family's apartment.

Dom enlisted the same medic who'd seen to my injuries the night I floated into his life on a piece of driftwood—a friend and fellow Shadow—to patch me up a second time. I wasn't exactly happy to have had my skull cracked in yet again, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't enjoying the time off, doing nothing but lying around and being doted on by Laura.

Mari called Max's phone midway through the week to inform me that rumors had been flying around the Academy regarding both mine and Donavan's absence. Everyone had definitely heard what he'd supposedly paid money to do that night at The Revelry, but as he was currently laid up in the hospital after sustaining injuries in a "car accident," the going theory was that "Southside's hot cousin" had ridden in to save the day. Mari encouraged that story, though she was not exactly enjoying her moment in the sun as the person with inside knowledge on the whole affair.

"*Joder*, people will not stop *talking* to me," she griped through the speaker of Max's phone. "I need you back here to scare them away with your resting bitch face."

"I'll be back in time for class on Monday," I replied, currently curled up on the couch under an old crocheted blanket and sipping the smoothie Laura had just handed to me. "I only just stopped feeling like someone was stabbing a knife through my skull."

"Fine," she huffed, and I could hear her heels click-clacking along the corridor of Holywell Hall as she spoke. "At least get your new phone soon. Not that I don't love talking to Max to get to you."

"Back at you, baby," Max purred into the phone.

"Max," she chided playfully. "Behave, mi amor."

"Seriously," I said, kicking at him with my bare foot where he sat on the coffee table with his Cheshire cat grin. "Keep it in your pants for five seconds."

We said goodbye to Mari, and then Max relocated to the couch, gently pulling my head into his lap so that he could rub at my aching temples like the saintly brother he was.

"So," he said casually after a few minutes of silence. "Are we going to talk about how those three dickheads you used to be best

friends with are all obsessed with you?”

“What?” I tried to sit up, but he held me still. “You’re out of your mind. You heard the things they said to me.”

“I did, and I didn’t say they’re not total and complete assholes,” he replied. “But Ferrero didn’t dance with anyone else that night. Hargraves wanted to beat my face in for touching you. Spencer is constantly watching you. They *all* look at you like that. It’s intense.”

Well, yeah. Intense dislike. Intense annoyance. Intense *condescension*. “You’re on crack.”

He chuckled. “I’m not saying they don’t want you gone from that school. You’re a wild card. You’re upsetting the order—fucking with their equilibrium. But you’re also the girl they were best friends with for eleven years. It’s probably mind-fucking them just as much as it is you, only they don’t have a clue as to why.”

I blew out a breath. “I’m not the same at all, though, Max. I used to be happy. Sweet. *Naive*. There’s no way they suspect anything.”

“I know. But there’s probably something deep inside them that just has some sort of instinctual connection to you.” He tapped my forehead lightly with his finger. “And while they put up a hell of a front, they did rush down to that office, probably after they opened the link to the livestream. If they really didn’t give a shit, they wouldn’t have bothered.”

It was true, and it irked me. It would make my life so much easier if I could just hate them outright—if there was not a shred of anything decent left in any of them. If there was nothing at all I recognized as the boys I knew. They were assholes, and I didn’t trust them, but after all these weeks, I still couldn’t find it in me to truly *hate* them.

“It doesn’t mean I’ll go easy on them,” I said quietly. “I’m going to take it all away.”

“You are,” he replied decisively. “And I can’t wait to see those fuckers bow down to their queen.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I'd had thoughts about skipping breakfast Monday morning and arriving on campus only just in time to get to my history class, but I decided that I wasn't going to be hiding from everyone after what happened at The Revelry.

Fresh off the train and armed with my earbuds, "A Favor House Atlantic" by Coheed & Cambria playing me onto campus, I entered the dining hall and set about grabbing some coffee while ignoring the stares.

It was cold today, so I'd donned a thick, soft white sweater before I left home, paired with dark jeans and chunky black boots. November had snuck up on me, the chill in the air reminding me that I'd been at the Academy almost two entire months and was currently only in possession of one small piece of the case I was trying to build against the Families—and zero of the puzzle I was trying to solve of my parents' murders. The copy of Zach's key was burning a hole in my backpack, but I still had a few more days to wait before I would be nosing around in Andrea Ferrero's most private business.

Those thoughts forced my gaze to the front of the hall where Zach sat with Bennett and Noah, as always, the three of them looking sharp in their suits. While Noah's attention was occupied by Annie and another one of her hangers-on as they flirted with him from the foot of the table, Zach and Bennett both now had their cold eyes on me.

I held their stares for two seconds before giving them my back. They were probably disappointed I'd returned to school at all, but they were also smart enough not to be surprised by it.

Mari was waiting for me in our usual spot at a quiet table near the back of the hall. "The chatter about everything has started to die down," she said as she sipped her coffee, her keen brown eyes scanning the room. "And you look extremely uninjured, so, hopefully they'll all decide the rumors were overblown."

I nodded. I'd had to ice the shit out of my hand to clear the bruising, and I'd painted my knuckles with concealer this morning to hide what remained of the cuts and gashes there. My dark hair hid the stitches in my head. "I'm not worried about it," I told her. "I was a target before this, and I'll be one after. Nothing's changed."

She gave me a nervous look. "Are you sure you want to hide the fact that you're the one that put Donavan in the hospital? Maybe Chad and Harper and the rest of them would be less inclined to mess with you if they knew."

I snorted. They'd be less inclined to mess with me if they knew a few other things about me too.

"I really had planned to be unremarkable in this place, if you can believe that," I said instead. "I'll make it back under the radar when something else becomes more entertaining than tormenting the Southside scholarship girl."

"Uh-huh," she replied, rightly skeptical.

We finished breakfast and headed to History, slowly making our way toward the third floor of Holywell Hall when Mari's phone buzzed.

Her face lit up, then she looked at me apologetically.

"Take it," I encouraged her. "I'll see you in class."

She had already whipped her phone out and was holding it up to her face as she fluffed her already-perfect hair. "Thanks, chica. I won't be long."

Leaving her behind to chat with her lady, I made my way into the small lecture hall and meandered to our usual seats near the back of the room. I'd just finished a text to Dom and was reading through my essay on patriarchies in world history when my brief and fragile peace was interrupted.

“Ugh, I can’t believe you came back here,” a tiny blonde girl said with a sneer. She’d stopped in front of my desk to look down her nose at me, flanked by two of her friends. She was vaguely familiar, but with her perfect blonde curls, short maroon skirt worn over a frilly cream blouse, and platform heels paired with thigh-high stockings, she looked like every other bitch in Holywell, and it was hard to keep them all straight. She went on, scoffing, “I guess you still haven’t learned your lesson.”

I blew out an irritated breath. I was not in the mood for this. “Guess not,” I said with a shrug, going back to my essay.

“It figures. Southside skanks aren’t known for their brain—”

“Agatha,” a cold voice barked.

Mari marched right into the girl’s personal space, snapping her perfect lavender manicure in her face. “I suggest you move along. You wouldn’t want your mother’s design company to lose the contract she has with every single one of my family’s hotels because you were running your mouth, would you?”

Agatha paled, and it really eluded me as to why I was the one always being called dumb when everyone knew Mari was my one friend on campus, and this exact thing had been entirely foreseeable.

“That’s what I thought. Scurry away now,” Mari said sweetly before dropping into the seat next to me.

I watched the group of them slink away. “It never gets old,” I murmured to Mari, grinning.

My grin vanished as Lisa flounced in, Hannah Langford trudging alongside her. Lisa stopped to chat with a couple of girls in the front row, and I decided to pass the next sixty seconds imagining creative ways to maim her.

As class was about to begin, Zach finally arrived. Dane and a few other Tier One hangers-on were with him. Lisa perked up, a smug smile on her face as she watched him walk by.

“Hi, Zach,” she purred.

He didn’t look up from his phone as he continued to his usual haunt on the other side of the room.

“Zach… *Zach!*”

Not even a nod of acknowledgement.

Lisa's cheeks reddened as she turned away, stalking to her seat a few rows back. Her eyes landed on me before she turned to sit, and she gave me one hell of a cold look.

I returned her stare, my face blank, until she turned and sat down in a huff.

Mari leaned over to whisper, "I've been hearing that while Lisa's been enjoying bragging about knocking you out and getting you into a compromising position as punishment for your continued refusal to *kneel*, she's actually really pissed off that her trick didn't get her more attention from Zach or the other Heirs."

"Maybe she'll back off, then," I mused, chuckling. "Since she's figured out that fucking with me is not a direct ticket into Zach's pants."

"Unlikely," Mari muttered.

As it turned out, Lisa wasn't the only one Zach was ignoring. He didn't look my way once during class or as we filed out into the hallway after we'd been dismissed. Not that this was highly unusual, but he usually didn't miss a chance to goad me when he could.

Mari and I hadn't made it far from the classroom before Lisa appeared in front of us, smirking in my direction.

"How's your head, slum girl?" she asked, her voice raised enough to be heard over the dim chatter of students moving through the hallway.

"Healed," I replied simply. "Thanks for your concern."

"You got lucky, bitch," she hissed, seething. "Next time you won't have your trash family members around to rescue you. Next time, we'll make sure to fucking *end* you."

"Jesus, you are such a *psycho*," Mari barked at her. "It's pathetic how desperate you are for Ferrero's attention. Wake up—he doesn't give a shit."

"No one asked your opinion," Lisa snapped at her. "Remind me: has your family disowned you yet for being a nasty dyke?"

Well, Lisa woke up today and chose violence, didn't she?

The next thing I knew, my fist had flown straight into her tiny upturned nose.

"Motherfucker," I hissed, yanking my hand back and shaking it out. Still a *little* sore from beating Donavan's face in, apparently.

Lisa shrieked like a banshee, her hands flying to her face, and blood began to ooze from between her fingers.

“Time to go,” Mari whispered urgently, dragging me down the hall and out of the fray that now surrounded Lisa. A few of her underlings rushed to her side to feign concern.

The last thing I saw before Mari pulled me around the corner and into the stairwell was Zach’s dark gaze as he watched the events unfold from across the hallway.



Mari bought me lunch at a trendy coffee shop across the street from the Academy’s front gates, where she also made me drink an herbal tea to “calm down.” I told her I was plenty calm, but I supposed it made sense that she was worried I might further escalate to using the knife I had in my backpack next time someone pissed me off.

She dropped me off at Tech Skills after loudly barking that exact warning, and I gave her my most innocent look before she huffed at me and stalked off, hips swaying and heels clicking as she disappeared.

Annie gave me a death glare when I walked past her row to go to my station. Hannah and Nick Ruiz both eyed me warily.

“Look, Mari was joking about me having a knife, if you heard that,” I said casually as I sat and set about logging into my computer.

Hannah raised a skeptical eyebrow at me, and I winked at her.

Noah arrived, and I did not miss the stern look he aimed in my direction before he set his bag down, put on his usual warm, encouraging smile, and directed us to log into today’s module on our computers.

I worked through the lesson, doing my best to ignore Noah as he flitted around the room, answering questions. When the long ninety minutes was over, I packed my backpack in a rush, deciding I was going to get out on the water for a bit before I started on my homework.

“Miss Miller, I need to speak with you before you leave.”

I glanced up to find Noah leaning against the front of his desk, his long arms crossed over his chest as he looked at me from behind those glasses like he was daring me to argue with him.

Annie, angry that Noah's attention was on anyone who wasn't her, turned to give me one last hateful look before she marched from the room.

Annoyed, I trudged to the front of the room and took up a post opposite Noah, perching my butt on the front-row table and crossing my arms over my chest to mirror his "I mean business" posture.

Picking up on my vibe, he relaxed, bringing his hands down to grip the edge of the desk on either side of where his annoyingly pert ass rested. He'd ditched the suit jacket today, and instead wore a navy vest that matched his slacks over his white dress shirt and pink tie. His blond hair was a little messy, as though he'd run his hand through it a few times over the last hour, but it did nothing to take away from the hot-professor vibe he was currently rocking.

"How are you doing?" he asked. "Fully recovered from everything that happened at the fall party?"

"Good as new," I replied, eyeing him with suspicion. "Is that really why you asked me to stay after class?"

His smile only grew at my hostility, like he found me amusing. "You really don't believe I could actually care about your well-being?"

"Why would I?" I replied. "Look, I do appreciate the fact that the three of you stuck that piece of shit in a hospital and concocted a cover story, but let's not act like that was for my benefit instead of the Academy and the Families."

He was unruffled. "Will you at least accept this as a peace offering?" He pulled a brand-new silver Knight smartphone from his pocket. "We did see enough of the video stream to know that your phone was destroyed."

I quirked an eyebrow in surprise. Dom had already set me up with a new phone, so I didn't exactly need this suspiciously kind gesture.

"Are there any strings attached to this little gift?" I asked dubiously. "Perhaps some untraceable spyware installed on it?"

"Why?" Noah asked, still grinning. "Are you planning to use your phone in ways that we'd need to be concerned about?"

I coughed. He was joking, but *still*.

I held out my hand, and he placed the phone in my waiting palm. While I had certainly been tempted to tell him to take his *peace offering* and shove it up Bennett's tight ass, I recognized that was my secret privilege talking. I'd give this phone to Max, who actually would sweep it for spyware, and then we'd give it to one of Dom's gym kids who couldn't afford a phone this nice.

Noah beamed at me like he was proud of me for being a good girl and accepting his gift without too much backtalk. "Great. And I know you won't believe me when I say this, but we certainly don't condone what happened at The Revelry. We do have a policy of non-interference in these things, but that was over the line. What the girls did was uncalled for, and what Donavan tried to do was disgusting."

I had to roll my eyes. "Could've fooled me. I can tell you have a bit of a caring heart, Noah, but the other two assholes couldn't have given a single shit about what happened in that room other than the fact that you guys had to clean it up. And I'm sure you have people for that, anyway."

Noah's smile vanished and his blue eyes went hard behind his glasses, and I knew I'd triggered his pissy mode by insulting his best buddies. "Don't presume you know anything about me or the other Heirs. We do what we have to do. And you can't say that you weren't warned—personally and repeatedly, by both me *and* Bennett—that something like this was going to happen if you remained at the Academy and continued to act as you have."

I stood up, realizing that this was what this little friendly meeting was really about, so I was finished listening.

"I'm not leaving school, Noah," I said, weary. I was very tired of repeating myself to them. "So, you can just save the rest of your lecture." I turned to leave.

"Joanna," he rumbled in warning, stopping me in my tracks. I couldn't believe that demanding, *dominant* sound that had just come from my sweet Noah.

Ugh, he's not my *anything. Jesus, Jolie.*

I huffed out a resigned sigh as I looked back at him over my shoulder.

“Believe it or not,” he said, his deep blue eyes boring into me, “I do not enjoy seeing you hurt. Bennett tells me you’re one of the better rowers on the women’s team. You can do that literally anywhere in the country. Please, just….” He let out a long-suffering sigh. “Just go have a *normal* college experience somewhere that isn’t here. This place isn’t for you.”

As if on cue, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, ignoring the fact that Noah would now know I took the phone he offered when I already had a new one, and I read the urgent message that had just popped into my school email.

I let out a wry chuckle, turning to flash the screen at Noah. “Looks like you may get your wish after all. The dean wants to see me in her office. Immediately.”

I wasn’t getting any sympathy from him. “That tends to happen when you break another student’s nose in the middle of Holywell Hall.”

“No,” I snapped. “That’s what happens when you break Lisa Aviano’s nose in the middle of Holywell Hall. When you break a crystal bowl on Joanna Miller’s head at an Academy event, you get the *Heirs* of the Four Families cleaning up after you.”

He just shrugged, giving me his adorable disarming smile before he stood up from his perch on his desk, and in two quick strides of his long legs he was in front of me. We were almost nose-to-nose when he reached a hand behind me to dig into the back pocket of my jeans, removing the new phone he’d given me from where I’d stashed it.

“Good luck with your meeting,” he whispered.

We just stared at each other for a few long, heated seconds before I finally recovered and stalked out of the classroom, off to introduce myself to the dean of Holywell Academy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Dean Amara Jansen regarded me from behind her stately mahogany desk like I was a stain she'd just noticed on her ten-thousand-dollar Persian rug. She was a thin woman, her dark-blonde hair a similar shade as her daughter's, only she kept hers in a severe bob that barely cleared her chin. She wore a pristine cream pantsuit, and her blood-red lipstick matched her nails.

"You know, Miss Miller," she began, dragging her scrutinizing gaze from my messy ponytail down to my boots and back up again. "I am proud of this Academy's commitment to providing scholarships to a few worthy students who have the drive to make something of themselves in this City. While there are, of course, challenges for a certain… *type* of student attending Holywell, those here on scholarship are grateful to be here and understand what a life-changing opportunity this is."

She paused to dramatically shuffle some papers around on her desk, and because I still had a tiny, minuscule kernel of self-preservation left in me, I refrained from rolling my eyes.

"However." Her sharp gray eyes snapped back to my face. "It appears that you have decided to thumb your nose at the gift you've been given. I've certainly heard rumblings of your behavior since the first day of the semester, but punching another student in the face is completely out of line and against our code of conduct." She mustered what I suspected she thought was a look of pity. "I have no

choice now but to expel you from Holywell. You will pack up your dorm room and be gone from campus by tonight."

I released the breath I'd been holding. I rolled my head around my shoulders and cracked my neck a few times, then I looked the dean right in her haughty, Botoxed face as I pulled my phone from the pocket of my backpack where it sat next to my chair.

"It's unfortunate that it's come to this, Dean Jansen," I said conversationally, scrolling through my encrypted chat with Max.

"It is, indeed," she huffed, irritated by my nonchalance. "And it appears your Holywell education meant even less to you than I'd thought."

"Oh, no," I replied, tapping on the link Max had sent me a few days ago. "My Holywell education means *everything* to me. I meant that it's unfortunate that our beloved Academy's code of conduct would see your daughter expelled too."

I held up my phone, and the video that had been recorded by the laptop in the office at The Revelry—before I'd smashed its camera—began to play.

Harper's nasally voice sounded from my phone's speaker.

"… just a little livestream that we'll make sure the Heirs have a link to, not that we don't all know you're slutty trash…." The video clearly showed me bleeding from the head while handcuffed to the radiator as Harper trotted in and out of the camera's view.

I let the video roll on and watched with great satisfaction as the dean's face began to flush with outrage.

"We're not kidding, you dumb bitch! We're going to make sure this key goes to someone with very flexible *morals."*

"Enough!" the dean barked, pounding a bony fist on the top of her desk.

I pasted on a confused expression. "Did Harper not let Mom in on what really happened at the Academy's fall party?"

The video continued to play as Donavan walked in and spewed his nasty shit. The feed cut out, and I pocketed my phone before giving the dean a look that said, "Your move, bitch."

"You will hand that video over to me at once."

Sure, lady.

“I will be happy to email a copy to your school address,” I replied. “I will also be emailing a copy to a lucky friend of mine from Southside who is currently interning at City News One. I know that you high-level families have your ways of making these things go away, but it’ll be pretty rough once the video is *out* there, you know?”

“Shut *up*, you little—”

“I mean, even if there were no *legal* consequences for, you know, assault, false imprisonment, reckless endangerment, etc., because, let's be honest, I’m sure that’s an easy one to just flash some cash at to make disappear. And even if Harper wasn’t expelled from Holywell because, well, you’re the dean, so that’s silly…. But if this got out, it could still be a little troubling for the Jansen reputation. That would be an annoying blemish on her case to be the perfect candidate for the future Mrs. Spencer, don’t you think?”

Dean Jansen glared at me, murder in her eyes and her fist clenched around her Montblanc pen.

“Or, you know,” I went on. “I could continue to keep this to myself. I don’t *love* how my hair looks all matted with blood like that, anyway.”

“Fine,” she snapped. “You’ve made your point. In lieu of expulsion, you will receive a written conduct warning in your file.” She spun in her chair, grabbing her phone from next to her computer before she began furiously jabbing at it with her thumbs. “Show yourself out.”

“Appreciate it, thank you,” I said brightly, standing and throwing my backpack over my shoulder. “Let Harper know I said no hard feelings.” I was sure it was her that the dean was currently rage-texting, probably to bitch her out for being dumb enough to put her crimes on video.

I’d had enough bullshit for one lifetime already, so I exited the dean’s office, ready to hole up in my room for the rest of the day.

Except as soon as I entered the hallway, I collided with a tall, broad chest outfitted in the finest bespoke Tom Ford money could buy.

“Going somewhere?” Bennett asked, catching me in his firm grip before I could bounce off him and into the wall.

Why was Bennett Spencer always *touching* me?

“Unhand me, Spencer.” See? I was going to nip this in the bud right away for once.

Except that I yet again underestimated how quick he was, and before I knew it, he’d manhandled me into a quiet corner of the deserted hallway a few feet away from the dean’s door.

He released my arms but stood close, blocking my exit with his big body. I craned my neck to glare up at him, the tall bastard, and I watched as he carefully studied me with those mossy green eyes.

“You don’t look like someone who just got expelled,” he mused, his gaze roving over my face, kicking my pulse up a few notches. “Or have you been lying about how much you actually wanted to be here?”

“Why are you in my personal space again, Bennett?” I fired back. “Or have you been lying about how much you actually hate me?”

Undeterred, he stepped even closer, placing his hands on the wall on either side of my head, caging me in.

And I continued to stand there and let him because *I liked it*.

“Answer my question,” he demanded, his voice a low, sensual husk.

“You didn’t ask me a question,” I replied, or purred, really, because I’d lost my mind.

He smirked, reminding me so much of Zach, before leaning in to nuzzle at my neck, and the eruption of butterflies in my stomach nearly knocked me off my feet.

He breathed me in, his rough cheek grazing my sensitive skin, and then he whispered in my ear, “Do you need help packing up your dorm room? Or are you a Southside cliche whose meager possessions only fit into one bag?”

“Two bags, actually,” I replied, caving to the urge to touch *him* now by running my fingers through his perfectly styled brown hair while he—holy shit—sank his teeth into the shell of my ear. I bit back a moan, fisting his hair with a rough tug.

“I see,” he said, releasing my ear and dragging his lips down the side of my neck. “Then it sounds like you should be gone in a few hours, then.”

I was tempted to let this charade go on—I really was. Because other than my dancing with Zach at The Revelry, I’d never been so

turned on in my life, and I was pretty sure Bennett would be down to fuck me right here in this hallway if he thought he'd never have to see me again.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" I murmured, releasing my grip on his hair and copping a quick feel of his muscular bicep through his suit jacket. "If I was just another casualty of Holywell's elite, washed out because I was so *undeserving* of the generosity of the Four Families?"

He finally removed himself from the crook of my neck, leaning back to look into my face again, suspicion now clouding his heated gaze.

It was my turn to smirk. "You should probably warn your future fiancé that recording her crimes is a dumb move, no matter how untouchable she thinks she is."

He stepped away from me in a flash, putting some much-needed distance between us, the meaning of my words instantly clear to him.

"You have the video," he said, back to being cold and distant.

"I have the video," I confirmed.

"You threatened the dean."

"I absolutely threatened the dean."

He huffed out a frustrated sigh, running his hand through his hair, which was still a little messy from my fingers—I liked that. "Have you lost your mind? You cannot come into Holywell Academy, put your middle finger up at its traditions, punch Lisa Aviano in the face—"

"I will remind you that she broke a bowl over my head first and gave me a *concussion*—"

"—and threaten the *dean* with nothing behind you but your bad attitude."

I scoffed. "I clearly have more tricks up my sleeve than you're giving me credit for. And you forgot that I also *take no shit from the Heirs*."

"That too," he growled. "We do not have the time nor the desire to continue to deal with you."

"I have never asked you three assholes to *deal with me*," I hissed. "In fact, you all need to leave me the *fuck* alone. I didn't ask Zach to run my friend off and dry hump me on the dance floor in front

of the whole school. I didn't ask Noah to keep me after class and then stick his hand in the back pocket of my jeans—"

"What—"

"And I *certainly* didn't ask you to ambush me in this hallway and put your *mouth* on me!" I was nearly shouting by then, thankful that most of the staff who officed on this hall had gone for the day.

Bennett crossed his arms, glaring down at me, and he didn't speak for a long, tortuous minute while I returned his stare, refusing to cower or wilt under it. He may have had regrets about what had happened here between us now that he knew I wasn't being expelled, but I didn't, and I sure as shit wouldn't be made to feel like it was somehow *my* fault.

"Fine," he said coolly. "Enjoy the rest of your semester."

He turned on his heel and stalked off. I finally released the last of the tension I was holding in, sagging back against the wall as I watched him go.

Then I smiled. I'd won this round, and I had faith that I only had a few more days to wait before I won another one.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



"Back entrance is clear. Ready when you are."

Dom's deep voice boomed in the tiny earpiece I wore, and Max tapped at his own before he whispered, "Roger. Entering now."

Thank God. We'd been hiding in this narrow alleyway for an hour, and the stench of the dumpsters and piss was starting to make me nauseous.

Max and I pulled our black balaclavas up over our faces, and he took a moment to fuss over my thin Kevlar vest like a tall, tactical-geared mother hen.

"It's secure," I whispered, slapping his hand away. "I haven't forgotten how to do this, you know."

His bright white smile was hidden under his mask, but I knew it was there all the same. "Just double-checking, JoJo. That bougie Academy would rot a lesser girl's brain."

"Will you two get moving? Christ," Dom barked in our ears.

Max turned to offer a salute across the street in the general direction of the Dorada Hotel where Dom was holed up in a room facing the Euphoria Club, manning the computers and probably watching us through the scope of his Barrett M95.

We crept around the dumpsters, confident that all external camera feeds had been looped for the next hour, and we entered the Euphoria Club's kitchen door—left propped open ever so slightly for us after the last employee had called it a night.

The Shadows really did have connections everywhere.

We found the kitchen dark and deserted, as expected. It was nearing midnight on a Wednesday, and most of the Club would be shut down or near it by now—except of course for the escorts that worked on the third and fourth floors. I doubted those hard-working men and women ever had a slow night.

“You remember the way to the basement door?” Dom asked, still managing to hover even though he was not physically here.

“Yes, Dom,” I huffed. “I studied the blueprint before I left, and it’s on my phone if we get lost.”

“You do not have time to get lost,” he replied. “Just like you would not have had time to pick this lock if you didn’t have an exact copy of the key.”

“Dad, stop lecturing us,” Max groused. “You’re being distracting.”

“I am watching your asses,” he retorted.

“Both of you, shut it,” I hissed as we reached the swinging saloon doors that led from the kitchen to the main Club floor.

I dropped to my stomach with Max following suit, and I quickly rolled under the door before popping back to my feet and smashing my body up against the wall in the dim hallway that stretched off to the right of the Club floor entrance.

From my vantage point, I could just make out a sliver of the interior of the Club. Dark wood floors reflected the dim blue lighting that shone throughout the room. The long bar took up the far wall, and the shelves behind it, lined with colorful bottles of liquor, rose all the way to the second floor of the Club’s main interior.

A few of the burlesque dancers appeared to be blowing off steam after their shifts at the bar where men and women dressed in gorgeous, expensive lingerie and costumes sat together, chatting and laughing. Round, golden tables dotted the floor, each surrounded by plush teal chairs. The second floor was open to the first, its art-deco-style railing running around the full circumference of the room.

I couldn’t see the stage from where I stood, but I knew from photos that it sat along the north wall and was framed by black curtains woven with gold geometrical patterns.

Max's big shoulders pressed into mine as he took his place next to me, and he nodded toward the end of the hallway.

"The offices are all clear," Dom said. "It looks like the only people still on premises are a couple of bartenders, a bouncer, and some of the dancers who haven't gone home yet. Remember, you're looking for the nondescript gray door at the end of the hallway, right before you get to the service elevator."

"Got it," I whispered, and then I darted down the hall with Max on my heels.

We passed several office doors, including the spacious one Andrea Ferrero used to meet business partners and important clients at the Club. At the end of the hall, before it turned a sharp corner and continued around to the back of the stage, was the service elevator. Beyond the service elevator was the back entrance to the club, accessible from the parking garage that Andrea had built for the Club ten years ago when she gutted and remodeled one of the last public housing complexes left in the City proper.

"Parking garage is currently clear," Dom informed us, and I could hear him clicking away at the computer in front of him. "Quickly. We don't know when the rest of the staff may head out."

We raced on light feet toward the elevator. As we approached, I scanned the walls for the door.

"There," I whispered to Max as we slowed our steps about ten feet from the elevator doors. Imbedded in the wall was a narrow, unmarked door painted a drab gray that looked like it would house equipment or something equally boring.

Anyone who spent any length of time working for Andrea in this Club knew of the existence of this door, but most could only speculate as to what it led to. The official blueprints of the Club showed it to be a simple storage closet, but we knew, courtesy of a few ex-Ferrero employees that had later joined the Shadows, that it actually led to a large basement area where Andrea kept an additional office as well as a… *workspace*.

"Fuck, Dom wasn't kidding about this lock," Max cursed as we approached the door. "That would've taken us a while to get into."

The doorknob itself looked old and almost rusted over, but there was a matte black K1000 lock just above it. A Knight model that

touted itself as virtually unpickable, it was the cream of the crop if you wanted to go old-school with your security.

No lock was unpickable. Every lock was made to be unlocked, somehow, whether it was by a code, a fingerprint scan, or a simple brass key. High-tech locks could be hacked; key codes could be stolen from an unsuspecting TA by his student; ID card barcodes could be cloned. An old-fashioned deadbolt lock could be picked, but we knew from experience that this one could take even the most skilled locksmith fifteen minutes or longer.

Time we didn't have.

Good thing I had an exact copy of Zach's key.

"This better have been worth getting my head bashed in and having to fuck up a sexual predator," I murmured, pulling the key from the little pouch on my belt. I disengaged the lock with ease, and we cracked the door open a minuscule amount, peering into the darkness to see if there were any signs of life down below.

There were no cameras for our team to hack into down there.

"It's clear," Max whispered, and we both slithered through the crack in the doorway before closing it quickly behind us.

"Locking up," I reported into my earpiece as I turned the deadbolt from the inside.

Max beamed his flashlight down the narrow staircase. The stairs were cement, unremarkable, and free of anything immediately incriminating—like bloodstains. We hustled down to the bottom and found ourselves in a large open space. Max's light bounced off the high ceilings, revealing dark black support beams running along the length and held up by sturdy poles placed intermittently throughout the room.

"Her office should be just beyond an area that looks like a lounge," Dom said.

We continued into the space, and Max's flashlight passed over what was basically a dad's basement mancave, except I was certain the furnishings cost thousands more dollars than the average dad would spend. There were several leather couches, a coffee table, a few lamps, and even a bar cart along the wall. The reddish rug that was now under our feet felt plush and new.

“Damn, okay,” Max exclaimed in a low voice as he shone his light beyond the lounge.

The rest of the large space was bare, but I had a pretty good idea what the chains hanging from the hooks drilled into the ceiling beams in the middle of the room were for, as well as the wall of sharp objects that lay just beyond them. The floor was cement, and I’d bet my inheritance there was a drain in the middle of the room.

“There’s the office,” I said, pointing to the red door just behind one of the big couches.

We crossed the room and made quick work of the much more pickable lock on the door. Once I’d popped it, we darted quietly inside, still working only by the light of Max’s flashlight. This office was small and sparsely furnished—a stark contrast, I suspected, from what Andrea’s “public” office upstairs would look like. There were a few wooden chairs set in front of a simple black desk. There was an old landline phone on the corner of the desk, a monitor that was not connected to a computer, and a whiteboard hanging on the side wall.

Dom’s voice came through my earpiece again. “Top drawer. Hurry—we have a car entering the garage.”

“Shit,” I hissed, moving quickly behind the desk.

“It could be nothing,” Max assured me. “Someone coming to pick up one of the dancers. Janitorial staff. Literally anyone except the handful of people who have a key to the basement.”

I nodded, taking a breath and focusing on my task. The top drawer of the desk was locked but once again easy to break into. I had it open thirty seconds after I pulled my lock picks from my belt.

“Where is it, you heinous bitch,” I murmured as I rifled through the contents of the drawer. A small handgun, a bunch of loose-leaf paper that I only wished we had the time to study or even just photograph, a box of condoms….

“Gross,” Max spat as I set the condoms on the desk.

“Rumor is, she’s been fucking her bodyguard for years,” I informed him. “Maybe even before Zach’s dad died.” My hand finally snagged on something that felt promising at the back of the drawer. “I’ve got it!”

I pulled out the simple old smartphone—a Knight model that hadn't been manufactured for at least fifteen years. I hit the little green power button on the bottom, and I watched with increasing dread as the blue screen flickered to life.

"We're sure this is what she would've used?" I asked, my hand suddenly starting to shake.

"If there was any communication about your parents' murder, she would have used that phone," Dom replied, his voice gentle. "It's what she uses for the stuff that's below board. The account is registered under a fake name, and the bill is paid yearly in cash. If we're lucky, there'll be text messages or at least logs of calls to the Enforcers we've identified in the footage from Hargraves Tower."

"I'm… I'm trying," I whispered, my shaking hands fumbling over the screen's few icons. "Fuck."

"I've got it, Jojo," Max said, reaching over the desk to slide the phone out of my hands.

"Shit, red alert, guys," Dom barked into our ears. "Two high-level Enforcers just exited the car in the garage, and Zach's Ferrari just pulled in behind them."

"No, fuck," I cried, my shakes escalating to a full-body tremble. "We can't leave without what we came for."

"It's okay. I've got it," Max said, his voice soothing me like a balm. "I'm pulling a copy of the SIM card onto my drive. It's almost done."

"Guys, I think you're about to have company. They've got a captive."

"Shit."

"Shit," I agreed, taking big breaths and trying to focus only on Max's serene face.

After a few more seconds, he snapped the phone closed and tossed it back to me. "It's done. We have to hide."

I shoved the phone to the back of the drawer again, tossed the papers on top of it, and tucked the condom box back into its corner. I slammed the drawer closed and followed Max as he raced out the door.

I spun in a circle, my eyes more adjusted to the darkness than they were when we first arrived, my adrenaline pumping hard. My gaze snagged on some scaffolding that had been left along the wall

just near the stairwell. The top of the structure was at least partially obscured by the ceiling beams and the darkness, and we really didn't have shit else for options.

"Max! Climb!" I whispered urgently, directing him toward the steel structure.

We scaled the narrow, rickety ladder to the small platform, which put us about six inches beneath one of the dark beams that held up the tall ceiling. We flattened ourselves to the floor of the platform, our black clothes blending with the beams and darkness. All we could do was cross our fingers that if Zach and his Enforcers came down here, they wouldn't have any reason to look closely at the ceiling in this quiet little corner of the room.

Dom's quiet voice sounded in our ears. "Incoming."

The door banged open, and the sound of muffled voices, along with some struggling and grunting, floated down the stairs.

Max and I watched, silent and still as the dead, as two burly Enforcers, dressed in their black tactical gear that sported the Ferrero serpent crest, hauled a thrashing man into the room. They bypassed the lounge and headed straight to the torture area, and within seconds, the man had been strung up by the chains, his arms flailing and his feet dangling inches above the floor. They stripped his lanky form naked, tossing his tattered clothes into an unmarked bin next to the wall.

More stomping and male voices sounded on the stairs, and I sucked in a breath as Zach came into view wearing a black jacket over a tight white T-shirt and dark jeans. He was followed by a guy I hadn't seen in person since I was nine years old.

I let out a tiny gasp.

"Fuck, is that…?" Max whispered.

I gave him the barest of nods.

It was about to get really fucking bloody in here.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



"Fuck you, Ferrero scum!"

I winced. The Ferrero team had a live one on their hands, and this guy apparently thought he was tough.

Zach sauntered into the lounge like it was just another Wednesday night at the Club, ignoring the shouting and cursing from the prisoner.

"Let's get this fucking over with," he said to his companion as he switched on one of the lamps in the lounge. "I have class in the morning."

"My poor nephew," the guy crooned at him. "Forced to get a fancy degree at a place where everyone kisses his ass just so he can inherit his billions."

"Fuck you, Frankie. I'm also running all over the goddamn City, cleaning up messes. I need to sleep sometimes, man."

Frankie "Fingers" Ferrero. He was technically Zach's uncle, but he was only, like, four years older than Zach was—the product of an illicit affair Zach's grandfather had later in his life that produced a little bastard half-brother for Andrea to deal with. And she had dealt with him by pretending for a long while that he didn't exist—he'd apparently only been allowed to take the Ferrero name once he proved to be such an asset to the Family.

And he was an asset because he was fucking crazy. Our sources said he'd become the go-to guy for… *convincing* people to talk, and

he was essentially running the Ferrero Enforcer team now at age twenty-three because everyone was scared shitless of him.

The nickname “Fingers” supposedly came from his favorite souvenir to take from those that found themselves subjected to his *talents*.

He’d come around the Ferrero penthouse some when we were kids, mostly when Zach’s dad had been alive and took pity on him, but he’d disappeared completely into the bowels of the Ferrero apparatus once he’d become a teenager.

He and Zach favored each other, though Frankie was quite a bit leaner than Zach was. He wore an old T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, the gaping armholes giving us a view of the myriad tattoos that decorated his lean muscled arms and torso. His tight, holey jeans looked like they came from the bargain bin at the thrift shop, and his scuffed Converse sneakers were even rattier than the ones I owned. His dark hair curled behind his ears in a little wave that almost made him look innocent, and the tiny barbells pierced through his eyebrow glinted in the low light of the room.

“You didn’t tell me Frankie Fingers was *hot*,” Max whispered, and if I could have moved without shaking the scaffolding, I’d have kicked him.

“*Not the time*,” I mouthed, narrowing my eyes at him in the dark. I hadn’t seen Frankie since he was a skinny, angry fourteen-year-old anyway, so it wasn’t like I could have known.

“Don’t worry,” Frankie said to Zach as they wandered over to the torture side of the basement. “This one talks a big game, but I know a coward when I smell one. We’ll get this done in, like, ten.”

Zach chuckled. “Let’s make it nine, then.” He motioned to the two Enforcers standing silently by while their charge was still shouting curses at them and yanking on his chains. “You two, beat it. Send the cleanup crew in an hour.”

The Enforcers nodded and filed out wordlessly, probably relieved they didn’t have to watch Frankie work.

Frankie had meandered over to the wall and flipped on the lone light hanging from the ceiling nearby and was now blasting a spotlight right onto his victim. Then he began to peruse the selection of pointy, sharp objects that hung on the wall.

The guy had stopped struggling, the paling of his face visible even from all the way up here. If he knew what was good for him, he'd cave quickly to whatever they wanted and wish for a quick death.

While Frankie was sorting through his toys, caressing them lovingly and whistling a happy tune, Zach stepped in front of the guy, his face more murderous than I knew him capable of.

"Did you honestly think," he said, his voice low and laced with venom, "that you could attempt a hit on one of the Heirs of the Four Families and live to tell the tale?"

I sucked in a breath. *A hit? On one of the guys?*

"That little blond shit killed my brother," the guy spat at Zach. "He too much of a pussy to take care of me himself?"

Noah killed someone?

"You and your brother are the worst fucking hitmen I've ever heard of," Zach scoffed, not moving a muscle. "And I hear you're the pussy. Your brother's dead because you used him as a human shield when Noah shot at you."

Jesus.

"Now," Zach went on, his smirk back in place, which loosened something in my chest. "You're going to tell us who hired you, or else I'm going to let Frankie Fingers over there loose with no rules."

"Fuck you!"

"Please don't speak to my nephew like that," Frankie admonished the guy like he was a kindergarten teacher telling a five-year-old not to put crayons in his mouth. "It's not *his* fault you're here, after all. You should take responsibility for your own actions."

"I don't fucking care what you do to me," the guy barked through gritted teeth as he watched Frankie pull a large curved knife of some kind from the wall. "I'm a professional, and I don't give up my clients."

I did admire his tenacity, but I'd have been more inclined to believe him if he wasn't shaking like a leaf right now.

"Are you picking any of this up?" I whispered softly to Dom.

"Not really," he replied just as quietly. "But if he starts screaming anything important, I'll try to record it."

“Alright, my friend,” Frankie said to the guy as he made his way in front of him. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

For all his talk, the guy only made it through the removal of a couple of fingers, at least one toe, and something weird Frankie had done to his balls with the curved dagger thing before he started sobbing and babbling away.

“It wasn’t a hit!” he cried, sniffing and gagging. “We were supposed to kidnap the Hargraves Heir for ransom. I only tried to kill him after he shot my brother!”

Zach had stepped away from the splash zone to stand by the wall with his arms crossed and looking almost bored with this whole thing. He narrowed his eyes at that revelation. “And for whom were you kidnapping the Hargraves Heir?”

The guy heaved and vomited for like the third time.

Frankie shoved a tiny little scalpel in between the guy’s toes. “My nephew asked you a question.”

He screamed. “Fine, fine, okay, okay! It was Silverman! Raquel Silverman!”

Frankie stood up from where he’d been focused on the guy’s feet and gave him an indulgent look. “See, that was very good. You could’ve saved yourself all this trouble if you’d just told us that a little bit earlier.” He looked to Zach. “Is that all you needed?”

Zach nodded, his face hard. “Yep.”

“Raquel Silverman owns a massive pharmaceutical company in Florida,” Dom said in a low voice. “Our file says her company tried to patent a revolutionary cancer drug last year, but it was blocked by Eagle, Peter’s company. They then got the patent themselves and made millions instantly with an identical drug.”

“So, she paid someone to kidnap Noah?” I asked in a hushed whisper.

“I assume she would’ve ransomed him back for the cost of what she thought she lost out on had they been the ones to come to market with the drug.”

“Fuck,” Max breathed. “These outsiders must not understand who they’re playing with.”

“I think there’s a Silverman at the Academy too,” I added.

I could hear Dom's fingers flying across his keyboard. "Yeah. Robert Silverman. Junior at Holywell. He's a nephew."

"Shit."

"Okay, then," Frankie was saying as he cleaned his knives with a silky-looking cloth. "I'll take care of this, and then we can get you back to school for your beauty rest."

Zach shook his head and stepped in front of the hitman, who sagged in his chains, only barely clinging to life. Zach pulled a gun from under his jacket and aimed it straight at the guy's head, growling, "No one fucks with my family."

He pulled the trigger, putting a bullet right between the man's eyes.

I lay there, shell-shocked by watching Zach *kill* a guy. I'd known that there was a strong possibility that my former best friends had been molded by the Families into something I wouldn't recognize after all these years, but it was still a slap in the face to see it with my own eyes.

He called Noah his family.

Zach was on his phone now. "It's done…. Yeah, it was Silverman—you were right. Have Bennett call in his courier for this one. I want what's left of the guy's head delivered to Boca Raton by tomorrow."

He jammed his phone back into his pocket and motioned to Frankie. "Let's get the fuck out of here, man. I hate the smell of piss and vomit."

Frankie smirked. "Yes, let's. I'm headed upstairs." He waggled his pierced eyebrows.

Zach chuckled. "Who's the lucky guy tonight?"

Frankie shrugged, caressing his knives once more before hanging them back on the wall. "I like to keep it fresh. We'll see who catches my eye." He hit the lights, then he followed Zach back through the lounge and up the stairs, slamming the door and clicking the lock back in place behind him.

Max and I lay there in silence for a long five minutes.

"Okay, Ferrero's clear of the garage and Frankie Fingers has disappeared upstairs," Dom said. "Get the fuck out of there now before the cleanup crew arrives."

He didn't have to tell us twice.



Max decided to accompany me back to school. We'd dropped our clothes and equipment off with Dom in his hotel room, changed into jeans and sweatshirts, and now we were both fighting to stay awake on the short train ride back to the Academy.

We scanned in through the front gates since neither of us had the energy to break into campus for the fun of it, and by the time we made it to my dorm room, I knew I was only going to get a few precious hours of sleep before I had to be up again for class—if I could fall asleep at all.

After we'd both showered, we sat on my bed in our PJs—Max kept shit in my room because why not—and we stared at Max's phone where it lay between us.

"You don't need to read it, Jojo," he said gently. "I can just tell you that we got what we were looking for."

"Just show me, Max."

He picked up his phone and logged into our encrypted server before scrolling until he found what I'd asked for.

He handed me the phone, and I peered down at the screen, those numb feelings washing over me once again as I read the copied text messages.

Andrea: JS confirmed, we're on for tonight 10 pm

Andrea: have the packages to HT 24 then

Unknown: understood

The texts had been sent at 3:00 pm on August 2, 2015—the night my parents were murdered, and my life changed forever.

I dropped the phone.

"There are also two outgoing calls to that same number from about a week earlier," Max whispered. "And we have the camera footage to show that 'HT 24' is—"

"Hargraves Tower, twenty-fourth floor," I finished for him. "And JS would have to be James Spencer."

He nodded. "Are you okay?"

I sighed. "I'm both always okay and never okay, Max. I listened as Andrea herself shot my mother in the head. None of this is news

to me. It's great we have more evidence to use against the Families now. But of course, there's fucking nothing here about *why*."

Why had they killed my parents? It sure as shit wasn't just for the fun of it.

"I know, Jojo. We'll find it."

He tucked me into bed then before climbing in on the other side and switching off the lamp. To my relief, I fell asleep instantly, Max's presence making it feel as though we were home in our bunks, tucked safely away from the festering rot of the City.

Zach's happy, laughing twelve-year-old face was the last thing I saw before I slipped into the darkness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I jumped into the pool, excited to be wearing my new purple swimsuit for our sleepover at Zach's house.

"Cannonball!" I screamed as I aimed right for where Bennett was bobbing in the deep end.

"Argh!" he shouted, ducking out of the way right as I hit the water.

"You're a weenie, Bennett!" I shouted at him as he surfaced a few feet away from me.

"You're ridiculous," he shouted back, splashing me in the face.

"Incoming!"

Zach landed with a big splash in the water right next to me, and I screamed. He swam up underneath me as I tried to kick away to the shallow end, but he grabbed my legs and pulled me the other way.

"Got you," he said with a big grin when his head popped up to the surface.

"Yep, you're the prisoner now," Bennett said, appearing on my other side and grabbing my wrist.

"Cut it out, you jerks!" I shrieked, but I was laughing. "Noah! Help me!"

Noah kicked over to us, his top half folded over the side of an inflatable tube. "Grab onto my tube, Jojo!" He splashed Zach in the face, smiling and giggling.

Bennett and Zach let me go, and I floated with Noah over to the shallow end.

“Come on, Frankie!” Zach yelled at his uncle who was really more like his cousin. “The water feels awesome!”

Frankie was older than us, thirteen, and he usually didn’t have time for our kid stuff. He was lying on a lounger by the side of the pool under an umbrella, reading something on his tablet. Probably a comic book.

“No, thanks,” he called back to Zach, not taking his eyes off of his tablet. “It’d be cool if you four would stop screaming so much.”

“You suck!” Zach yelled back. He liked Frankie, and even though Frankie pretended not to like Zach, I knew he really did.

I decided it was time to dry off for a little bit, mostly because I wanted some lemonade, so I ran up the steps of the pool to get my towel off of the lounger next to Frankie.

“Watch it, Little Knight,” he grumbled. “You’re dripping on me.”

“Sorry, Frankie!” I took the end of my towel and dried off the few drops of water I’d gotten on his tablet.

Suddenly, clouds moved over the afternoon sun, casting a dark shadow over Zach’s pool deck. I shivered—I was really cold now.

I looked up to see Zach, Bennett, and Noah standing at the edge of the pool, looking at something in the water. Their faces were blank.

Zach’s mom stood on the other side of the pool, wearing a tight red dress and tall red high heels. She smiled at me in a way that made me feel very nervous.

“Look, sweet girl,” she called to me. “Look what happens to traitors in our Families.”

I turned back to Frankie, confused. “What does she mean?”

Frankie looked at me curiously, twirling a big, scary knife with a curved blade in his hand. Where did his tablet go?

“You don’t know?” he asked, cocking his head.

I walked toward the pool. The water wasn’t blue anymore. It was red.

“No!” I screamed. “Mom! Dad!”

My parents just floated there in their pajamas, their eyes open, but they weren’t moving.

“Help!” I cried. “Help them!”

“We can’t,” the boys said in unison.

And then someone pushed me into the pool.

"Jojo, wake up. Jojo!"

I gasped, my eyes flying open to find Max, his long hair hanging in disheveled strands around his face as he looked down at me with a worried brow. He grasped my sweaty hand, and I sucked in a few calming breaths.

"You didn't tell me you were having nightmares again," he said, his stern voice sounding just like Dom's. "After all this time?"

I sat up with a groan. "Yeah, I mean, not every night or anything. But there's a lot of reminders of my old life here. It's… a little triggering."

"I'll bet."

I gave him my most serious side-eye. "Don't tell Dom or Laura. They'll worry."

"I hate to break it to you," he said with a soft smile, "but they're always worried about you. No matter what."

I sighed. Having a family again was the best thing that could have ever happened to me, but it also meant that I had people who would be hurt if the worst happened.

If by avenging my parents, I went down with the ship.

And I knew that if it came to it, I would do just that.

"I know that look," Max said with a frown as he hopped out of bed to hunt for his clothes from last night. "They knew what they were signing up for when they adopted you. As much as they might wish you'd be content to remain Joanna Miller forever and just fuck off to Europe to live your life, safe and free, they've spent all of this time preparing you to take back what was stolen from you. They're proud of you. *I'm* proud of you."

A sense of calm washed over me. I didn't know what I'd do without them. "Love you, brother."

"Love you too."

Finding my own sweater and jeans on the floor, I began pulling them on, definitely running late already. Max was going to miss his first-period class at Southside High, and I'd be lucky to get anything to eat before I had to be in my Leadership Seminar.

As I sat on the end of my bed, lacing my boots, a knock sounded at my door.

Max was fully dressed, so he ambled over and pulled it open.

Noah stood there, looking dapper in his dark gray suit and sky-blue dress shirt, and the friendly smile he'd had on when the door was opened dropped right off of his face when he realized it was Max standing there.

"What are *you* doing here?" he asked in a low voice.

"Hey, bro," Max replied with his lazy smile, leaning against the door frame. "Neil, right?"

I bit back a cackle.

"It's Noah," he replied through the world's most forced smile. "Noah *Hargraves*."

"Oh, that's right. My bad, dude. All you rich kids look alike to me." Max took a step back from the door and crossed his arms, blocking Noah's view of where I was still sitting on the end of my bed. "You need something?"

"I'd like to speak to Joanna, if you don't mind."

"I do mind, actually."

"You're not her keeper."

"You don't know anything about me, man."

"Max!" I said, worried we were going to draw attention if this dick-measuring continued while Noah was standing in the hallway. "Let him in."

Noah smirked at Max like he'd won something before he stepped into the room and closed the door.

"What did you need that you couldn't ask me in ten minutes when we have class together, Noah?" I asked, standing up from the bed and going to my desk to pack up my backpack. "And I thought Bennett and I came to an understanding that you three were going to be leaving me alone from now on?"

"That sounds like a great idea," Max added, and Noah glared at him before looking at me.

"We absolutely intend to leave you alone," he said. "Completely. But I needed to ask you a question first. You weren't at breakfast, so I thought I'd just stop by instead of pulling you aside in front of the others."

"You embarrassed to be seen talking to my cousin, Nate?" Max asked, his smile failing to mask the threat in his voice. "What the fuck

are you doing in her room, then?”

Noah huffed out an exasperated sigh. “Will you leash your guard dog, please?” he asked me. “The hostility is unnecessary.”

This was really the most entertainment I’d had in a while, but I was also going to be late if it kept up, so I moved to stand next to Max, rubbing a calming hand over his back. “Let’s just hear what he needs, then you can toss him out on his privileged ass, Maxy.”

Noah ran a hand through his wavy blond hair, clearly over our shit, before he pinned me with a scrutinizing look. “How’d you get the video from The Revelry? I know it may not seem like it, but Annie actually is pretty adept with tech, and she set that livestream to be accessible by a link sent to my phone only, and it should have wiped itself off of the laptop in the office as soon as you cut it off. And yet….”

“I have a copy and used it to blackmail the dean into not expelling me,” I finished for him.

“Correct. I’ve checked my phone repeatedly for any sign it was compromised and found none—so I presume you somehow pulled it from the laptop before you left….” He looked at me, a tiny, barely there apology on his face. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but your skills in my class are middling at best.”

I snorted. “Thanks, Noah. That’s on you as my teacher, isn’t it?”

He ignored that. “Answer my question.”

I smiled. “No.”

“Joanna—”

“Is that all you wanted? We’ll both be late if we don’t wrap up this little chat pronto.”

“You heard her, Norman.”

“Knock, knock! Chica, I brought you a bagel—” Mari came waltzing into the room, coffee and doggie bag in hand, and she pulled up short with a startled gasp when she encountered Max and me in a standoff with Noah.

“Um,” she said slowly, closing the door behind her. “What’s going on in here?”

“Nothing, girl,” I replied. “Noah was just leaving.”

“Hey, babe,” Max purred at her. “Missed you.”

That perked her up. “Max, mi amor, just who I wanted to see.”

She trotted over to him, shoving the coffee and white paper bag into my hands before the two of them did the double-cheek-kiss thing because that was the level they were at in their friendship, apparently. Then she gave him her biggest puppy dog eyes. “Carmen won’t be able to fly to the States until after Christmas, so I need a date to the Holiday Ball. Since my best friend is done with Academy events and all”—she darted a glance over at Noah, holding her chin high—“for good reason.”

Wow, even Mari was feeling a little feisty in the face of an Heir this morning. Noah was getting it from all sides, and the look of exasperation on his face said he’d had enough.

“Mari, you really can’t find a date among the students who actually attend school here?” he griped at her. “The Holiday Ball is the Academy’s biggest event all year.”

That was Max’s cue. “I’d love to be your date, babe. You have to take me shopping, though.” He tossed a smirk at Noah. “Us Southsiders don’t really come with the proper attire for rich-kid parties.”

“Deal.”

Noah’s face had flushed, and seeing him all ragey and flustered when he was usually so friendly and charming made my morning.

“Joanna,” he snapped. “I’m not leaving without an answer.”

“That’s fine, Noah,” I replied, throwing my bag over my shoulder. “I’m headed to class, though. Lock up when you leave?”

Max chuckled, kissing me on the hair before giving me a sly look. He offered an arm to Mari. “Allow me to escort you to Holywell Hall before I head back to Southside.”

She giggled, grasping him around the crook of his elbow. “Gracias, mi amor. Bye Joanna!”

Traitors.

Noah watched them leave, scowling at the door, before turning back to me. He took a few purposeful strides forward, stopping right in front of me to give me a stern glare, his arms crossed like he meant business. My boots gave me a few extra inches of height, so I was almost eye level with his over-six-foot frame.

A small smile crossed his face, his mood apparently improved now that the others were gone. “I’ll get my answers, Joanna,” he

said, his voice low and full of promises.

“And I’ll get mine, Noah,” I said, returning his smile.

His brows crunched together in confusion, his pretty face suddenly boyish and so much like *my* Noah once had been that, right then, I decided to let myself have just one last hit of *my* boys before we would be back to business.

Back to being strangers.

On opposite sides of a war they didn’t know they were fighting.

“If that’s all you came here for, I guess this is goodbye,” I whispered, closing the remaining inches of distance between us, holding his deep blue eyes with mine.

“I guess it is,” he whispered back, wrapping his hands around my hips and pulling me into his body. “I hope you put some serious thought into transferring at the end of the semester. It would be best for everyone—especially you.”

“Hmm,” I hummed, pretending to think it over while I ran my hands up his firm arms and clasped them around his neck. I leaned in, ghosting my lips over his as I whispered, “Fuck you, Noah.”

He smiled against my mouth before taking my lower lip between his teeth. He gave it a gentle tug, and a little moan escaped me.

“If only, Joanna,” he murmured, his lips still pressed against mine.

This risky little dance I’d started was about to go further than I’d intended. With great effort, I released him and stepped back. His hands fell away from my hips without resistance.

I pointed at the door. “Get out.”

He did as I said without argument, pausing at the threshold to throw one last look at me over his shoulder, his smile vanishing and his eyes downcast. “Goodbye, Miss Miller.”

As the door slammed behind him, I hardened my resolve. I still had work to do, and continuing to allow the Heirs so close to me was a dangerous game I could not afford to keep playing.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



For the next two weeks, the Heirs kept to their word, and I kept to mine. I threw myself back into my routine, determined to fade into the background as the semester wore on and the class workload intensified.

I woke up early every day to get my workout in as I prepared for next month's Holywell Chase—our big fall competition before crew season began in earnest in the spring. I kept my nose down and focused on my studies, determined to have my final papers and projects completed before Thanksgiving break. I spoke to only Mari or my family, and I managed to refrain from punching anyone else in the face over the continued comments and jeers from the Tier One bitch brigade and the sexual harassment that Chad had decided was his default whenever I was within earshot.

I still saw Zach, Noah, and Bennett everywhere—in our shared classes, in the dining hall, around campus—but they didn't engage with me, and I kept my distance from them. Bennett had figured out how to stop watching me obsessively every time we were in a room together. Zach didn't needle or tease me. Noah paid no attention whatsoever to me in Tech Skills class.

None of them came anywhere close to *touching* me again.

The three of them had, however, taken to showing up in the weight room early on Tuesday and Thursday mornings when I would usually be there alone. They'd walk past me without acknowledgement, take up a rack on the opposite side of the room,

and proceed to get hot and sweaty together. Zach would usually end up shirtless. Noah wore the tightest gray sweatpants known to man. Bennett always had his tiny shorts on.

It was torture, but I kept my dad's playlist blasting in my ears every time to remind me to keep my focus on what was important.

And I might have also forgotten to wear a shirt a time or two because fuck them—I could also play that game. They never let me catch them looking, but I could feel their eyes on my back the entire hour, every time.

There had also been some excitement on campus around mid-November when Robert Silverman had been hauled out of B Dorm in handcuffs just as most of the student body was walking to breakfast. Rumors flew, the gist being that he'd been found in possession of a large amount of cocaine with the intent to distribute. Campus security had packed him up and shipped him back to Florida before lunch.

Dom informed me later that Raquel Silverman's Boca Raton mansion had been raided by the feds, all her assets seized, and her company was in the process of being stripped for parts and auctioned to the highest bidder.

It was impressive, and I wondered if Peter Hargraves had been the mastermind of that little hit job or if the Heirs had done this one on their own.

I couldn't say I was mad about it either. The Silvermans had come after Noah, and he could've *died*.

I didn't like that at all.

Finally, I was, as always, quietly observing the Heirs from afar because I still had one more mark. I'd somehow known even before I arrived at school that he would prove to be the most difficult, and I'd been right.

Bennett.

I needed a way into Spencer Tower, and he was going to get me in there. Unlike Zach, however, Bennett kept his key ring—containing the key to his ridiculous McLaren Artura and one of only three key fobs in existence that allowed access to all floors of Spencer Tower, including the penthouse—in his pocket. I'd never seen him put it in his bag, and that made things difficult for me.

But I was determined to work it out.

That was how I ended up surprising the shit out of Mari on the Friday before the Thanksgiving holiday began when I approached her about going to the pre-break party being thrown in A Dorm.

“I… what?” She stared at me, a quizzical look on her face as I stood in the doorway to her dorm room. “You want to go to an A Dorm party? I mean, I will not look a gift horse in the mouth here, but… I want it on the record that I think this is suspicious.”

“So noted,” I replied with my most innocent smile. “What should I wear?”

She gave an excited little squeal before dragging me into her closet.

I emerged some time later, dressed in tight, high-waisted leather pants, a deep-purple crop top, and very expensive black pumps that were a half size too small for my feet. “Mari, first of all, I will break an ankle in these.”

“Excuse me, where did the tough bitch that is my best friend run off to?”

I huffed. “Second of all, I am now officially a giant. It’s unnecessary.”

She hummed, standing in front of her mirror as she put in her diamond chandelier earrings. “Good, now you can look that tall asshole Bennett Spencer right in his face.”

I froze. Did she suspect…?

“Well, you could if he wasn’t very clearly avoiding you,” she added, and I relaxed—marginally. “I approve of that, by the way, even though I really did love watching Harper’s head explode over how he used to look at you. But the peace and quiet has been nice, don’t you think?”

It had been, but unfortunately, I knew it wouldn’t last forever. “Definitely,” I replied. “I know we are rocking the boat here by going to this thing, but I’m just… curious, is all. I’ve never been to one of the Dorm parties.”

I was *curious* if Bennett would be drinking. Maybe letting loose a little bit in the crowd. Maybe letting his guard down just enough….

“They are kind of a shit show,” Mari said, turning to face me and smoothing the skirt of her very sexy magenta dress. “But it can be

entertaining. We'll give it an hour and see how we feel."

It was a solid plan. I followed her down the stairs and out into the chilly evening air, noting a few other brave souls from C Dorm that were also trekking toward A Dorm to see how the other half lived.

When we arrived at the front doors of the modern condo building that was A Dorm, we found the front door propped open by what looked like a ceramic garden gnome. We entered the lobby and slipped right into the raging party going on inside the large atrium that encompassed the first floor of the dorm.

The atrium had been furnished with clusters of expensive couches and armchairs artfully arranged around low coffee tables. The back of the room appeared to be the designated rec area where there were pool tables and several additional round tables set up for poker games. Double French doors set into the far wall, their arches inlaid with golden filigree, had been thrown open, allowing easy access to the A Dorm's giant patio. I saw several firepits blazing among the many seating areas outside.

C Dorm was basically a hostel, while this was a luxury hotel.

The lighting was low, limited to the few Tiffany lamps that dotted the end tables throughout the room. A large space had been cleared in the middle for the dance floor, and it was already packed with people dancing to the loud music that blared from the room's state-of-the-art sound system.

At the very back of the atrium was a long bar top that opened into a kitchen. It had been piled high with every type of expensive liquor and mixer imaginable. The necks of champagne bottles poked out of the top of several ice buckets perched on the edge.

"I assume there is no keg hidden back there in the kitchen?" I asked Mari as we made our way toward the drinks.

She scoffed at me. "Gross, no."

I let her pour me a glass of expensive champagne before we found an open couch near a group of some of the scholarship students. Mari immediately struck up a conversation in rapid Spanish with one of the guys, and I gave a polite nod to a couple of the girls from my crew team before I settled in to find my mark.

It wasn't hard. While I wouldn't have been surprised to find the three of them on actual thrones like the princes they were, they were

still easy to spot sprawled around a couple of the bigger couches near the center of the room with their fan club surrounding them and hanging on every word.

Zach was dressed down, wearing ripped black jeans that still probably cost a thousand dollars, a tight white T-shirt, and dark boots. He swirled a glass of brown liquor in his hand, and his lip ring glinted in the low, colorful light of the lamp nearby as he laughed at something Dane was saying to him, but his dark eyes were cold.

I felt my lip curl as Lisa, wearing a tiny skirt and a silky, low-cut top, pranced over and made herself comfortable next to Zach, pawing at his tattooed bicep. He didn't exactly acknowledge her, but he didn't throw her off of him either.

Noah was seated opposite Zach on another couch, and maybe because he always seemed the most approachable of the three, he was *surrounded* by girls panting for his attention. Annie had taken up a post sitting on the coffee table right in front of Noah, her legs crossed and her dress riding up high enough to flash him her panties. A couple of her Tier Two hangers-on sat on either side of him, one of them bold enough—or drunk enough—to repeatedly run a hand along Noah's thigh as she spoke to him.

Noah wore his tailored slacks and a light-blue dress shirt with the buttons undone just enough to glimpse the tanned skin of his chest. He wore his usual agreeable smile as he spoke to the girls, but like Zach, his smile did not reach his eyes. Behind those sexy glasses, his deep blue eyes were hard, but the girls didn't seem to realize it—or they didn't care.

Bennett sat in an armchair near Noah, looking like a GQ model in his dark sport coat he was wearing over an equally dark dress shirt. He appeared bored, of course, occasionally sipping from his glass as he watched over the party. While he spoke to no one, Harper had parked herself on the plush arm of his chair while she held court, chatting animatedly to her friends and looking very smug about where her ass was at the moment. Tonight, she wore a skimpy black dress and dark, bold makeup, and I wondered if Bennett liked that kind of thing.

Fuck—no, I didn't.

If any of Heirs had noticed or cared that I'd shown up to this party, they didn't show it—not that it mattered anyway. If Bennett planned to just sit in his chair and brood all night, this was probably all going to have been for naught.

Half an hour passed as I observed the room. People were getting drunker by the second, and the faint smell of weed also wafted through the air. I spotted quite a few couples (and even some throuples) getting busy on open couches and in dark corners of the room as if most of these people didn't have their own private dorm rooms just one quick elevator ride away.

Exhibitionism was apparently an A Dorm party staple.

And Bennett never moved from his spot, which meant Harper didn't either. I decided I would drink about half of this glass of champagne, convince Mari to dance a few songs with me while I gave Bennett one last chance to move, and then we'd call it a night.

Dom and I could reassess my plan over the break.

"Well, if it isn't Southside," a lazy voice sounded, interrupting my plotting. "And here we all thought you didn't like hanging out with us."

Chad ambled into the space in front of me, flanked by a few of his meathead bros and some clinging, giggling girls I didn't know. His eyes were glassy and his words a little slurred, so I doubted anything good was about to happen.

"Fuck off, Chad," I drawled. "You're looking a little pale, there. Mari'll kill me if you puke on her shoes, so best keep it moving."

His girlfriends gasped, scandalized on his behalf, but he just chuckled. "Oh!" he boomed over the music, shooting me a shit-eating grin. "Are you here because you've finally decided to let one of us up in that slum pussy? I've asked around, and apparently you think you're too good to fuck an Academy guy. Or girl—I asked them too."

Ugh, well, now people were starting to look this way, as tended to happen if someone starts drunkenly shouting the word "pussy" in a crowded room. Since I did not enjoy the feeling of Chad looking down on me where I was seated—so comfortably—on the couch, I stood up on my borrowed high heels with an annoyed groan.

His smirk dimmed a bit as I rose to my now well-over-six-foot height on five inches of borrowed Jimmy Choo. I crossed my arms

and looked down into his beady little eyes. “Careful, Chad. You’ll upset your flock of *prime* pussy if you keep worrying so much about mine.” I motioned to the pouting girls behind him. “Look, their feelings are hurt already.”

He tossed a careless look over his shoulder, rolling his eyes before he did a very dumb thing and stepped into my personal space. He made a show of looking me up and down with a gross leer. “It’s too bad for Donavan he didn’t get what he paid for, isn’t it? Or maybe he got further than we’ve all been led to believe? Come on, Southside, you didn’t let him get just a little taste?”

Laughs and jeers sounded, and Lisa’s shrill voice rose over the crowd. “She totally did!”

“Slut!” someone else yelled.

I sighed. This party sucked.

I managed to hold onto my emotionless mask, though my temper was starting to simmer. There were a lot of eyes on me now, including those belonging to my ex-best friends. A quick glance in their direction told me that they were watching this shit unfold with cold detachment—even sweet Noah just sat there without even a hint of a frown on his pretty face.

Chad went on, still talking way too loudly. “I mean, your tits are a bit small for my taste, but I’d still definitely take you for a ride.”

Then he reached for me, aiming one hand to grope the sliver of skin peeking between my high-waisted pants and the hem of my crop top, while grabbing my wrist with the other.

Without a second thought, I jerked the hand he’d grabbed upward and used my other to yank down hard on several of the fingers he’d wrapped around my wrist, breaking them instantly.

“Oh, fuck!” he shrieked, scrambling back a few steps and holding onto his broken fingers. “What the fuck, you psycho bitch!”

“You shouldn’t touch people without their permission, dickhead,” I said simply, shaking out the wrist he’d grabbed like it could rid me of the residual feeling of his slimy hand on me.

“You’re gonna pay for that, whore!” one of Chad’s girlfriends screeched at me.

I blew out a frustrated breath, turning back to where Mari was still sitting with the other tolerable scholarship students she’d been

chatting up. They all looked at me like I'd grown another head.

"What?" I asked. "You guys saw him grab me. Can't let him think he can do that—to me or any other girl."

Chad was still yelling obscenities behind me somewhere while other partygoers whooped and shouted and talked over one another, the bloodlust infecting the crowd and cranking up the volume in the room.

Mari hopped to her feet, smoothing her dress and pasting on her business face before she stalked toward me. "Let's get some air, shall we?" She looped her arm through mine and led me through the gauntlet of wary, appalled stares from my peers as we headed for the doors.

I went willingly—the night was a bust anyway. My mark was apparently rooted to his damn chair, never once wandering into the crowd where his pocket could be more easily picked.

Probably because I'd been thinking of him, my eyes collided with Bennett's as I made my exit. Harper had leaned into his space, her lips near his ear and her hand on his arm as she whispered something excitedly. He didn't respond to her. Instead, he just watched me as I walked toward the doors, dark fury radiating from those mossy green eyes.

Another time, Spencer. Just you wait.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



"You don't need to miss out on the party for me, girl," I said to Mari after we'd sat in silence for a few minutes. The frigid night air had done me some good. I'd cooled off at least a little bit from my altercation with Chad, but I felt guilty that Mari was now freezing her ass off, sitting with me on a stone bench outside of A Dorm instead of enjoying herself inside.

"Are you sure?" she asked, hesitance clear in her voice. "I don't mind heading back to C Dorm with you."

"I'm sure." I gave her a confident smile. "I've had enough of everyone's shit for tonight."

Enough of Chad's shit, for sure.

Enough of watching Lisa, Harper, Annie, and other faceless girls rub all over the Heirs like they belonged to them.

Enough of being in the same room as the emotionless husks my ex-best friends had decided to become whenever I saw them.

I waved Mari away, sending her back to the party, then I got to my feet and started the uncomfortable trek back to C Dorm in these heels.

My way was lit by the soft yellow glow of the streetlamps that lined the campus sidewalk. It was quiet out here save for the low thumping of the music I could hear emanating from the open patio doors behind me at A Dorm. An occasional loud laugh or shriek sounded from the partiers outside, but otherwise it was only me and the rustle of the fall leaves in the chilly wind. I shivered, quickening

my pace to get back to the heated comfort of my room before I could no longer feel my fingers.

I'd only just passed the entrance to B Dorm when I realized someone was following me.

Slowing my steps, I paused, bending down as if I was adjusting my uncomfortable shoe. I carefully stepped out of my heels, then I whirled around to face the idiots who'd decided to creep up on me.

"Uh-oh, she caught us," Chad droned, stepping into the light of the sidewalk lamp. He held up his hands in mock surrender, the broken ring and pinky fingers of his right hand now sporting what looked like a hasty tape job. "Those kids from the ghetto are probably used to always looking over their shoulders, right?"

"Is that right, Southside?" Chad's accomplice said with a sneer.

I recognized him—Cameron Murphy, Tier One student from one of the big banking families linked to Spencer. He was a tall, lanky guy with dark brown hair he'd let grow into a hideous mullet situation. I was pretty sure he was on the lacrosse team, and he was one of Chad's main lackeys.

He went on, looking at Chad. "You think she's scrappy? Got some fight in her?"

"I sure hope so, man," Chad purred, running his gross eyes up and down my body yet again.

I shouldn't have been surprised that Chad had decided my having broken his fingers in front of the entire school couldn't go unpunished. I'd been tired, frustrated that I was no closer to getting what I needed from Bennett, and had my big cozy bed on the brain, so I'd been caught off guard.

Fighting off not one but two meathead assholes had not been in my evening plans.

I said nothing, eyeing the both of them as I shifted back and forth on my bare feet. The concrete was freezing underneath them, but I'd been barefoot in the cage many times. It was certainly preferable to fighting in Mari's stilettos.

"What, *now* you decide to keep your obnoxious mouth shut?" Chad snapped, advancing toward me. "You need to learn a fucking lesson, Southside."

“You need to learn to keep your disgusting hands to yourself, asshole,” I replied. “I suggest you and Beavis over there turn around and go back to burying yourself in booze and willing girls. I’m not in the mood for this.”

“Too fucking bad,” he shouted in my face. “You’re a mouthy, insolent bitch who thinks the rules of this Academy—of this fucking *City*—don’t apply to her. Maybe if we break that pretty face a little bit, you’ll remember your fucking place.”

He swung his fist right at my nose. I threw an arm up to block the hit before ramming my knee right into his thick stomach and knocking the wind out of him straight away.

“Fuck!” he shouted, staggering back.

I had to move quick because I’d seen Chad at Fight Night, and he wasn’t a slouch. He’d just underestimated me, a girl, and he wouldn’t make the same mistake again if I didn’t put this shit to bed as soon as possible.

Cameron ran for me, attempting to tackle me to the ground, but I quickly stepped out of the way, breaking the loose hold he managed to get around my arm. He was sloppy, not trained as Chad was, so I made quick work of jamming a foot straight into his knee.

“Fucking *shit*,” he wailed and fell to the ground, and I knew I needed to get him out of commission quickly or else I risked being overpowered by the two of them together.

Chad had recovered and came at me again, grabbing me around the middle and tossing me sideways. I hit the ground hard and rolled to my hands and knees, scurrying away from Chad and over to Cameron who was on his ass, trying to get to his feet with a fucked-up knee. I jumped on top of him, slamming his back to the ground and pinning his boney elbows with my knees.

“Lights out, motherfucker,” I hissed, then I rammed my fist straight into the fragile bone of his temple, knocking him right out.

I had no time to enjoy that lovely moment before Chad was on me again. He yanked me off of his unconscious friend and then threw his big body on top of me with a roar. We struggled, hands and fists flying. He landed a hard punch straight into my cheekbone right before I managed to ram my foot into his junk. He seized up, and I rolled him off of me with a mighty heave.

My face throbbed, and the world spun for a few seconds as I tried to get to my feet. Blood trickled down my cheek, and I cursed Chad for yet another fucking gash in my skull Dom was going to have to fix for me.

I didn't have my usual knife in my shoe since I'd let Mari talk me into sexy high heels for the evening, but I didn't live through listening as my parents were murdered in front of me without the kind of lasting trauma that required me to always have a weapon of some kind on me to feel any sense of security.

As Chad recovered from the hard shot to his nuts, he crawled toward me as I stood up, hooking his uninjured hand around my ankle and yanking it in a move meant to take me to the ground again. I stumbled, falling to my knees. Before Chad could crawl on top of me again, I ripped the switchblade from its nest inside my bra, flicked it open, and with all the strength I could muster, I twisted around and jammed the blade down on Chad's hand, stabbing straight through the top of it and nearly impaling my own fucking foot in the process.

"Oh, fuck, oh my God!" he screamed as I twisted the blade in his meaty hand. "What the fuck, you crazy bitch!"

He rolled onto his back, and I took the opportunity to kick him hard in the ribs before I crawled on top of him.

I sat on his chest, watching in fascination for a few seconds as he cried and cradled his bloody hand, the silver of the blade's tip just peeking through his palm.

After I'd had my fill, I grabbed the hilt and yanked it out while he screamed. I wiped the blade clean of his blood using his dirty, sweat-soaked white polo shirt, wrinkling my nose in disgust. "Fucking gross, Chad," I muttered.

He started rocking underneath me, trying in vain to buck me off as he moaned in pain.

"Nope, stop that," I ordered him, pressing my blade to the base of his throat. "Don't you fucking move."

He stilled, sucking in shaky breaths as he looked at me in wide-eyed terror.

"Good boy," I cooed. Fuck, my face hurt. "Now, listen carefully to what I'm about to say. You're going to get your pathetic ass up, and

you're going to walk yourself and Murphy back over there to A Dorm. You're going to sneak in the back so no one sees you, and you're going to say nothing about what happened here tonight. Are you understanding me?"

When he didn't reply, I pressed my blade harder into his throat, drawing just a little blood.

"Ah! Fuck, okay, yes!" he screeched.

"Call a car, or whatever it is you people do, and go get patched up. Tell your parents you got mugged outside the gates, or whatever —I don't give a shit."

He tried to nod but then let out a pained hiss as the movement pressed my blade further into his throat.

"I'm serious, Chad," I growled, getting right up into his face. "If I hear even a whisper about this, your browser history and some interesting files you have on your laptop are going to become public information."

"What… the fuck… are you talking about?" he wheezed.

I shook my head like I was very disappointed in him. "*Tsk*. I think you know those girls are all underage, Chaddy. Don't try to deny it. It does make sense, though." I leaned in further, getting almost nose to nose with him before I whispered, "Because Daddy has the same tastes, doesn't he?"

Chad had gone white as a sheet, and whether it was from blood loss or fear, I didn't know nor give a shit.

"Who the fuck are you?" he croaked.

I chuckled. "I'm a ghost, asshole." Then, slowly and with great care, I climbed off of him and got to my feet. I looked down at him, twirling my knife lazily through my fingers. I pointed back toward A Dorm. "Get the fuck out of my sight."

After a few failed attempts, Chad managed to get upright on his shaky legs. He pulled his shirt off with trembling hands and wrapped it around his bleeding palm. He hobbled over to rouse Cameron enough to get him to his feet, and I watched as they limped slowly away.

Suddenly everything hurt, and I was very cold.

I trudged over to the nearest seat—the front steps of B Dorm—and I dropped my ass onto the bottom step. I felt my adrenaline

crashing, and I sucked in a few deep breaths. I stayed there, working on controlling my breathing while my head throbbed, and I watched Chad and Cameron plodding off in the distance as they finally disappeared behind A Dorm.

I hung my head in my hands, willing myself to get up the motivation to walk the rest of the way to my dorm.

After a few minutes, two black-booted feet appeared on the sidewalk in front of me. I lifted my head from my hands just as Zach knelt, bringing himself down to my level to look into my face with those depthless dark eyes.

A hint of a frown tugged at the corners of his lush mouth before it disappeared in an instant, replaced by his usual cocky smirk. He reached up, cupping my swelling cheek with his big hand before rubbing his thumb gently across the bleeding cut there. He pulled his hand away, glancing at his now bloody thumb, then he wiped himself clean on his expensive T-shirt like it was a cheap rag.

“Had enough yet, Princess?” he whispered, eyeing my injury with what looked like amusement.

I wondered if he’d somehow seen the state of Chad and Cameron, but if he had, I doubted he’d have thought any of this was funny.

“It’s just a scratch,” I said, emotionless. I didn’t want to do this with him—with any of them—anymore. They’d made it clear where they stood with me, as I had with them, and I needed to remember that.

His smirk morphed into something more serious. “Eventually, it won’t be just a scratch,” he replied ominously. Then he rose, and he didn’t offer me a hand to do the same. “Go home, Princess.”

As he turned to leave, I muttered, “Someday, Zach.”

He paused, tossing a look of confusion at me over his shoulder, but then he shrugged and ambled off, whistling like he didn’t have a care in the world.

I shifted, pulling my phone from my back pocket, thankful the tight leather had kept it secure through all of the bullshit of the night.

I dialed Max.

“What’s up?”

“Hey,” I said, licking my chapped lips. “I want to come home tonight.”

“Now? It’s pretty late—are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I replied, my voice cracking slightly. “Can you please… come get me?”

Max was silent for a moment. “I’ll be on the next train out.”

“Thanks. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I couldn’t wait to see the back of this place.

CHAPTER TWENTY



"Dom, are we sure she needs to keep doing this?" Laura stood in our little kitchen, wearing her robe and wringing her hands. She gave her husband her widest, most pleading eyes. "This is the second time you've had to patch her up in a month!"

Dom hovered over me where I sat obediently on one of our barstools. Max had half an ass cheek on the corner of the couch where he leaned casually with his arms crossed, giving me a stern glare.

"Baby, it's not up to me," Dom replied as he finished gluing the skin of my face back together. "And look—good as new now. She didn't even need stitches this time."

Laura rolled her eyes at him before she looked at me, pouting. "I don't like this."

"Laura, I've had worse injuries than this from sparring at Dom's gym," I pointed out. "And you should see the other guy."

"I am going to murder Hendrickson," Max announced. "Right after I murder my sister for neglecting to give me a heads-up that I was going to find her *bleeding* when she asked me to come get her from school out of the blue."

"You are all overreacting," I griped. "I'm fine. And I literally put a knife through Chad's hand. He's under control."

Dom paused where he was packing the first aid kit at the kitchen counter. "You *what?*"

“Are you fucking serious?” Max said at the same time, a smile back on his face.

Laura handed me an ice pack, and I pressed it to my tender cheekbone. “Look, I let him know we have the receipts for his *and* his daddy’s kiddie porn addiction. He’ll keep his mouth shut.”

Dom sighed, wrapping an arm around Laura where they were both now reclined against the kitchen counter. “We knew this was going to be a dangerous game. And we’re only just getting started.”

I took the four steps required to get from the kitchen to the couch and sank into the cushions. Max joined me, grabbing my free hand and squeezing, like he was reassuring himself that I was here and okay.

“I’ll get us into Spencer Tower,” I said, the determination I felt warring with exhaustion. I looked over my shoulder back at where Dom stood in the kitchen. “I won’t let you down.”

He gave me a wan smile. “I know, Jojo. But this only goes as far as you want it to. I’d rather you be safe—that’s more important than justice for your parents *or* the people I’ve lost.”

I knew he felt that way, but I wasn’t going to let a few bullies run me out of the Academy when there was still so much to be done.

But for now, I wanted to pass out in my bunk with Max tucked safely in his bed below mine, and I wanted not to think about the Academy, the Families, or the Heirs for an entire week.

So, that’s what I did.



Thanksgiving week at home was a wonderful break from what had become my reality at the Academy—though you could say that it was my seven years posing as Dom and Laura’s niece that had been a wonderful break from the reality that was my actual life.

Olde Town was beautiful in the fall. The leaves of the mature trees that lined Main Street had turned lovely shades of yellow and orange. Many of the old rowhouses that surrounded the main thoroughfare were decorated with festive autumn wreaths, and neat piles of fallen leaves dotted the curbs. Though the air had been

chilly, the skies were sunny, and I had a little pep in my step on every walk over to the Boathouse to visit Bruce and borrow his indoor rowers. He'd eyed my busted face with great suspicion, but he hadn't asked, and so I hadn't offered to elaborate.

Mari came down to visit midweek, dressed like a winter princess in a long white coat, sky-blue scarf, and gray heeled winter boots. She blew into Laura's bookstore with fancy coffees for Max and me and then spent the afternoon ignoring us to hang out with Laura, and Dom had been just as charmed by her when he popped his head in after work.

The bruises and healing cut on my face did not escape Mari's notice, either. I insisted my injuries were from training at Dom's gym, but she gave me a squinty-eyed glare that said she didn't exactly believe it. I was worried that if she knew the truth, she'd feel some guilt or blame that she'd gone back to the party instead of walking with me to C Dorm that night.

So, like the good friend I was trying to learn to be, I lied to her.

Once my face had healed up enough for Dom's liking, he lifted his ban on my visiting the gym. I spent a couple of afternoons fucking around with Max, saying hey to a few of our old friends who drifted in and out, but I stayed out of the cage—I'd had enough of beating the shit out of big, mean dudes for at least the next few months.

Poor Matt Jennings gave me a shy little wave when I arrived one afternoon and then proceeded to avoid me like the plague. I could've sat him down and explained that I didn't think less of him for running off at the command of an actual Heir of the Four Families, but also, I didn't have the energy, and it really was better for him to move on from any feelings he had about me, anyway.

The night before my return to the Academy, I finally caved to the itch to get back to plotting the demise of my enemies. I spent a few hours poring over the Spencer Tower blueprints while mindlessly twirling my knife in my hand like it would somehow help to spark some answers.

"We'll get there, Jojo," Max assured me. We were huddled on his bottom bunk, studying his tablet together. "Maybe you should just knock Spencer out and empty his pockets."

I snorted. “That would be cathartic.” With a dramatic sigh, I handed him the tablet and flopped back on the pillow. “I just have this gut feeling that James Spencer was the mastermind behind my parents’ murder. If I’m ever going to find anything that will help me understand *why* they did it, I think he’ll be the one to have it.”

Max nodded, shutting off the tablet and readying himself for bed. “Then we’ll find it. Dom and the team are ready to pull the trigger as soon as we get the keys.”

I sat up, gave him a kiss on his cheek, and then climbed up into my top bunk and crawled under the covers.

That night, I dreamed of young Bennett, Zach, and Noah once again, but this time, I was the one with the gun and the blood on my hands.



When I walked into the dining hall on Monday morning, I felt the eyes of every student present swing in my direction. I sensed the usual loud buzz of chatter suddenly go eerily quiet, even with “Set Phasers to Stun” by Taking Back Sunday drumming in my ears.

My plan had been to grab a coffee and a bagel and duck back outside to call Dom, but I’d be damned if I let these cretins think they could run me out of the dining hall with their hateful looks and conspiratorial whispering.

So, I grabbed a plate and proceeded to pile it high with eggs, bacon, and fruit. I poured myself a giant coffee, then I made myself comfortable at the open end of a table right in the middle of the room.

“Chad, you said she wasn’t coming back!” Lisa’s whine carried from the front of the hall where the top students sat at the feet of their princes.

“The bitch is stupid—what do you expect?” Harper added, loudly.

“Will you guys please *stop* giving her attention?” Annie snapped, and *that* I agreed with.

I stared at them, quirking a questioning eyebrow at Chad, who was sulking over his plate like he was mad at the world.

He glared at me, and I took in his heavily bandaged hand with quiet glee.

My makeup covered the lingering bruising on my face, so except for Zach—and by extension probably Bennett and Noah—no one else knew I'd been involved in a bit of a dustup after I broke Chad's fingers.

I couldn't wait to hear what Chad was telling everyone had happened to his hand.

Of course, thoughts of my brief meeting with Zach had me peering up at where the exalted ones sat looking hot and bored and unperturbed by the shouting and griping below them.

"Chad, you can't let this stand," Lisa hissed. "We *all* saw what she did."

"Drop it, Lisa," Chad barked.

The table quieted, and I continued to leisurely eat my breakfast while I smirked at Chad, who was now trying to murder me with his eyes from where he sat.

Unfortunately, Chad's glum attitude and refusal to participate in plotting against me snagged the attention of the Heirs. Bennett's intense scrutinizing glare was now aimed in my direction. Zach's usual lazy smile had faded to irritation, and he was now puzzling over me as he realized that he might not have the whole story from that night. Noah just looked tired.

"Ugh, who pissed in your crepes this morning?" Harper griped at Chad.

"Seriously, dude," Dane said, nudging him with a laugh. "Buck up. The trash will take itself out."

"Exactly," Annie said, reaching across the table to rub Chad's arm affectionately. "We'll handle it."

Her declaration appeased the masses, I guess, because the usual lively hubbub of the dining hall started up again, and more than a few dirty looks were thrown in my direction.

Mari, who had dropped into the chair next to me midway through all of this, huffed out a sigh. "I think the peace and quiet is over."

"Yep." I tossed back the rest of my coffee and got to my feet, smoothing my worn white sweater that was currently hanging loose off one of my shoulders before slinging my backpack onto my back. I

eyed Chad's bandaged hand and the now professional-looking tape job on the broken fingers of his other hand before giving him a shitty little wave.

I leaned down to whisper into Mari's ear before I made my exit. "Worth it."



The week that followed was a true test of my patience.

The insults and jeers that had on occasion been tossed at me in the hallways and other shared spaces increased dramatically, which meant I generally couldn't stick my head out of my dorm room without being yelled at for being either poor trash from Southside or a loose skanky whore spreading diseases around the Academy.

I quit showering in the locker room after crew practice when I caught someone trying to sneak photos of me from under the stall door. The girl ended up with a broken hand after I stomped on it before she could get the shot, but I had Max monitoring the Academy listserv for days just in case a naked photo of me did end up being passed around the school after all.

I was pushed and tripped when I entered and exited class. Guys propositioned me for paid sex daily. Lisa even tried to get me with a whole mug of scalding hot coffee one morning at breakfast, and I'd only avoided first-degree burns on my exposed skin because I was constantly on my guard, so I'd seen her coming and jumped quickly out of the way.

While Chad refrained from directly participating in any of the bullshit aimed at me, he had plenty of minions willing to mete out what they thought was justice in his name. Mari did what she could, but she couldn't be by my side all day long to scare away the sheep with scathing Spanish insults and threats to bankrupt lower families.

The thing was, if I'd been told exactly what I'd be dealing with because of my decision to break Chad's fingers, I knew deep down I'd still have done it—every single time.

Through it all, I managed to get all my final papers and projects turned in, so I would be coasting through the last few weeks of the

semester. My early morning workouts were still a place of solace, and I was feeling ready for the Holywell Chase on Saturday.

My only failure was with respect to my most important job—Bennett.

Other than in the dining hall, our shared classes, and from afar at crew practice, I never saw him. The Heirs hadn't even invaded my weight room on our designated days this week. They stayed above the fray, as usual, observing as their loyal subjects did their best to run me out of school. They still watched me sometimes, too, but distrust and suspicion finally dampened the fire that used to burn between us.

By the time Friday rolled around, I was exhausted but focused. I was going to kick ass at the Chase this weekend, and then I was going to get myself the key to James Spencer's darkest fucking secrets.

And then I was going to ruin him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I finished tying my shoes with several angry pulls on the laces. The excited chatter and laughing in the locker room around me made it clear that no one else on the team was as put out as I was with their crew assignment for tomorrow's race.

Coach had put me in a coxless four with Harper and two of her cronies, and after the week I'd had, I was not into it. It was Friday afternoon, and we were about to begin our pre-race practice—a trial run of the course with our newly assigned crews.

"Yes, any day now we expect the negotiations to be finalized," Harper prattled on from the other side of the locker room, her huddle of adoring fans getting ready around her. She held out her hand to admire her naked finger as if there was a giant diamond there. "I could be engaged before the beginning of next semester!"

I smothered the possessive beast that tried her rear her head inside of me over that bitch touching one of *my* boys—because they weren't mine and hadn't been for a long time.

"Hey, trash," Harper called as the rest of the team began to file out of the locker room. "Move your ass. You better not slow us down."

I ignored her, forcing myself to my feet. I pulled on my long-sleeved crew shirt because it was cold as shit outside, and then I took my place in line, marching down to the dock like I was on my way to the gallows.

The expansive dock was abuzz with activity. Staff from the athletic department were readying the area for the influx of visiting teams that would arrive tomorrow, and members of the men's team, which had held their practice earlier in the afternoon, were milling about as they cheered in the last of the crews running their time trial of the three-mile race.

Bennett's team of eight pulled hard across the finish line, their coxswain announcing through his bullhorn that they'd beat their fastest time on this course. If they could replicate that tomorrow, they'd have a great shot at beating the team from New Jersey that was currently ranked first in the nation.

I watched as they all celebrated together—a huge accomplishment after months of preparation—and the big beaming smile that bloomed across Bennett's face hit me like a punch to the gut.

I hadn't seen him smile like *that*—so bright and genuine—since we were little kids. I'd thought the last seven years had stomped that kind of happiness right out of him.

Harper dropped the oar she'd been about to load into our boat to clap and cheer, waving at Bennett like a loon.

"Jansen, get your crew hands on now," Coach Janet barked as she stalked past us on her way back up to her office to finish planning for the big event. "I expect this to be our fastest four."

With that, we loaded into our shell, each of us manning our oar and preparing to start strong when it was our turn to head out.

"Let's do this, ladies," Harper yelled from her position at the stern.

"Keep up, Southside, and don't touch me," Bettina Gomez spat at me, apparently unhappy about getting stuck in middle crew with the freshman who had poverty germs she was afraid to catch.

We moved into position out on the water. The racecourse, already marked by colorful buoys, would take us down the west fork of the Obsidian River and out into the wide open water to the south of the City for about a mile, and then we'd loop around and head back.

We would be one of the last of the day to take our practice run. The afternoon sun had already begun to sink in the sky, the clouds of

the early December day doing little to help warm us up as we floated on the water, waiting for the other crews to clear out ahead of us.

“You all know what to do,” Harper said to the team, giving me a smug little smile.

Well, that set off a tiny alarm bell in my brain, but I had no time to linger on it because she immediately began to call us to the ready.

“All four, sit ready to row,” Harper barked. “Row!”

And then we were off, all of us pulling at our oars in synchrony and with everything we had.

We pulled away from the dock and out onto the open water. I zoned out, focusing on my form and my breathing as Harper steered us south. After several hard minutes, the Academy had faded into the distance, and the ornate skyscrapers of the City proper had come into view. The wind whipped at us, blowing across our bow from the west while we continued to drive south, away from the City’s shores.

“Full pressure!” Harper shouted at us, commanding us to row all out as we headed for the buoy that would mark our turnaround.

We were making excellent time, and for about sixty seconds, I decided to give Janet credit for throwing me into this boat full of terrible girls who loathed me, because it was definitely shaping up to be a winning combination for tomorrow.

“Spinning!” Harper barked a minute later as we pulled past the final buoy, the City now at least a mile off in the distance.

I adjusted my strokes, expecting to begin the turn, but I realized instantly that the rest of the crew continued to go full steam ahead as Harper steered us straight past the buoy and further down river.

“What the fuck!” I shouted, whipping around to glare at her. “I know you didn’t just miss that turn!”

She stuck her lower lip out at me, feigning a confused look. “Oh, did I?”

Shit.

I watched with great irritation as the few other crews that were near us on the course made the turn and began their return north and back to the Academy. Harper was deliberately fucking up our pre-race run with the full cooperation of the rest of my teammates,

and I knew there was likely only one reason she'd want to give up being prepared to win tomorrow and all the glory that came with it.

She'd give up that little bit of glory if she could return to the Academy docks, bragging to her friends—and the Heirs—that she'd finally gotten one over on the Southside trash.

I jammed my oar into the water, trying desperately to drag the boat down, and while that slowed us, it wasn't going to get me back to the Academy.

"Okay, that's enough!" Harper shouted to the others. I watched as they released their oars, and I heard her do the same behind me. "It's the end of the line for you, gutter slut."

I dropped my oar and gripped the sides of the shell with everything I had, jerking my head around to glare at her. "Fuck you, Jansen. Did you forget the little video clip I still have in my possession?"

She scoffed. "I'm not afraid of anything you *think* you can do to me, skank. It was a nice try, though."

Then she grabbed at my right arm while Bettina and the other traitorous bitch in the boat climbed into my space to try to dislodge my other arm.

I kicked and screamed. I called them every dirty name under the sun. I managed to punch Bettina in the nose and elbow Harper hard enough in the ribs that she fell back into her seat. But we were in a tiny fucking rowing shell that gave me no room to maneuver to fight, and there were three of them and one of me.

They finally managed to dislodge me after a minute of me screaming and clawing at them like a rabid wildcat, and then they shoved me overboard and into the dark, cold water of the Obsidian River.

I hit the water hard, and the icy shock of the river knocked the wind right out of me. I kicked back to the surface, sucking in huge, shaky breaths as my head popped out of the water.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Later, bitch!" Harper cackled at me as the three of them began to row away. "Better start swimming! Can't blackmail me if you're dead!"

I coughed and sputtered, using every ounce of energy I had to just keep fucking breathing as I treaded water. There was no use trying to paddle after them—even with a lopsided crew they were going to be long gone in a matter of minutes.

"Fuck," I croaked. "*Fuck*."

Not again.

I spun in a frantic circle, trying to figure out where exactly I was. The waning daylight and the cloudy skies made my visibility shit. Knowing the rough mileage of how far we'd gone on the racecourse, I could only guess that where I was currently floating—treading water and slowly freezing to death—put me about as far from Bruce's boathouse as from the Academy. Trying to get to either place would mean swimming about a mile, most of it in the dark.

My heart started to pound, my vision narrowing, the sounds of the choppy water sloshing around me fading as my ears started to ring.

Shit, shit, shit.

Just fucking swim, Jolie!

Through the fog, I tried to assess the situation: I was a strong swimmer and could swim a mile in half an hour on a good day. I also knew the temperature of the river was around fifty degrees this time of year, which meant I had to be out of here in an hour or I was well and truly fucked.

I surged forward, kicking and flailing, and I decided on the fly that following the race markers floating in the water back to the Academy was the safest bet as I was losing daylight.

My arms were so heavy, my fingers already going numb, and I didn't know how long I'd be able to feel my feet. I started kicking, focusing on the rhythm of my legs, and then I swam as hard as I could, sucking in rapid, harsh breaths that burned my throat.

I will not die out here in this fucking river.

I will make it home.

I will see Max again.

I will see Dom and Laura again.

I will tear down this God-forsaken City in the name of Mom and Dad.

I will wrap my hands around Harper Jansen's delicate little neck and watch as the life leaves her eyes.

Mom.

Dad.

Kick, stroke, breathe.

Kick, stroke, breathe.

Follow the buoys, Jolie.

Get home.

I felt dizzy. I hoped I was still going in the right direction.

I was so cold.

Kick, stroke, breathe.

On and on.

And on.

I swam forever.

It was really getting dark now.

I could see lights. I was right next to the buoys. That was good.

I flexed my feet that were now bare since I'd sent my shoes to the bottom of the river a long time ago, desperately trying to keep feeling in them.

It was so dark. I was so cold.

I see boats.

I don't want to die. Not yet.

I was getting closer. I had to be. I was still near the buoys. I could see the dock.

Kick, stroke, breathe.

There was no one left out here. Practice was long since over. No one came looking for me.

There! I was by the dock. I just had to grab it and hold on, then I could rest.

I reached out, but I missed. Shit, where was I?

A big hand surged into the water, grasping my numb, outstretched arm. I was hauled upward, my soaking-wet trembling body flopped onto the dock, and then suddenly I was lifted into strong arms.

"Fuck. Shit. *Shit.* Hang on, Joanna. Just hang on."

The world was spinning around me, and I sucked in desperate, dragging breaths, willing my heart to stop pounding so hard.

And I was so fucking cold.

I tucked my face into the neck of the man who'd pulled me from the river as he ran with me in his arms, his familiar scent wrapping around me, and I gripped him tighter as I let out a pitiful little whine.

"*Bennett*."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



I lost track of where I was except that I was in Bennett's arms. I heard the loud slamming of a door, and the warmth of central heating enveloped me.

The locker room.

The lights were off except for the emergency bulb above the door, leaving most of the room shrouded in shadows. Bennett strode quickly through the room and into the shower area, and before I knew it, I was out of his arms and thrust into a stall. He cranked the water on, turning the temperature to just barely warm, and then he pulled me into the stream by my soaking wet shirt.

"Take this off," he demanded, the urgency in his voice a shock to my battered system. "Your shirt and your trou. Get them off before you freeze to death."

"Okay," I mumbled. I yanked at my shirt, but it was stuck to me.

"Shit, here." He stripped me quickly, ripping my shirt over my head and pulling my shorts down to my ankles, leaving me only in my black sports bra and simple black cotton panties. I stepped out of my shorts, and he grabbed my shoulders with his big hands and pushed my back to the tile wall, letting me rest against it as he angled the showerhead so that the water was aimed at my torso.

I trembled, the lukewarm water heating my core as the numbness slowly began to recede from my extremities, but it wasn't calming the buzzing in my ears or fixing my tunnel vision or helping me fucking breathe normally.

“Hey,” Bennett snapped, grasping the sides of my face and forcing me to look into those mossy green eyes I remembered so well. There was barely any light where we stood, but I could *feel* the intensity of his stare, the deep frown marring his handsome face, and the hard grind of his jaw as he assessed me intently. “Look at me,” he demanded. “Breathe. You’re safe in here. Just *breathe*.”

“Bennett,” I said, teeth chattering. “I’m trying…. I can’t. I can’t breathe.”

“You’re having a panic attack,” he said, still cradling my face. “Breathe with me. In and out. In and out.” He sucked in a big breath and blew it out slowly, repeating the same pattern. I watched him, trying to match his breaths, and after a long, hard minute, I was able to slow my breathing enough to do it.

“Good girl,” he said, his gruff praise threatening to stir something deep within me, even in my state. “Are you warming up?”

“Yeah,” I said, still shaking. “I just… I fucking hate that river, Bennett. I hate it.”

“Interesting sentiment for someone who’s been rowing on that river for years,” he replied. He stepped closer to me, turning off the water as he pulled the lone towel from the rack nearby and wrapped it around me. He still wore his long sleeve crew T-shirt and tight black sweatpants, both a little damp at this point, and he studied my tortured face. “Stop thinking about the river,” he commanded. “Stop it.”

“I can’t,” I moaned. It would be in my nightmares forever. He didn’t understand.

He moved his hands down to my bare hips, his fingers grazing the skin just above my panties. Then he pulled me in close, enveloping me in his arms, and I could feel the warmth of his body as he held me tightly. He rubbed my back with his big hands, still trying to calm me down, and we stood there, wrapped around each other in that warm shower for several long, quiet minutes as I sucked in big, shaky breaths.

I realized that while all of this had warmed me up considerably, bringing my brain back online, Bennett’s hands on my body were beginning to stoke a different kind of warmth in my belly that I had no strength left in me to smother.

“You’re still shaking,” he whispered, pulling back to look at me again. “What do you need?” His strong fingers dug into the skin at my hips. “*What?*” he asked again, now back to be bossy and demanding.

You.

“Distract me,” I croaked.

His green eyes heated at my plea. “Okay, focus on me,” he rumbled, dragging my eyes back to his again. “Just me.”

Then his hand dipped into the front of my panties, and he wasted no time in dragging his fingers down through my folds and straight to my clit.

Instead of batting him away for being a presumptuous shithead, I widened my legs to give him better access, our eyes still locked as my breath hitched.

He began to move his fingers in slow circles, coaxing me to follow him down this path, and all I could do was bite my lower lip and let out a tiny moan.

“Yeah?” he whispered, applying just a little more pressure on that sensitive bundle of nerves. “Better?”

“Better,” I breathed, my heart now pounding for a different reason. “More.”

He grinned at my demand, slow and sexy. “Are you wet for me?”

“My whole fucking body is wet, Spencer,” I snapped at him, his lazy, tortuous teasing of my clit driving me nuts.

He shook his head at me with a wry chuckle, like he’d expected my sass, right before he drove two thick fingers into me, both sliding in with little resistance because I hadn’t been lying.

He closed his eyes, groaning, before he snapped them back open to watch my face with rapt attention as I cried out, my scream at his sudden invasion turning to an obscene moan as he hooked his fingers right into my G-spot.

“Fuck, Bennett,” I whimpered as he began to thrust his fingers in and out of me, the heel of his hand hitting my clit with every stroke. “Oh shit.”

“Eyes on me,” he growled when my eyes fluttered closed, the pleasure that was building in my core threatening to overwhelm me. “Watch what I’m doing to you.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered in what was nearly a whine as my eyes snapped back to his gorgeous face. I lifted my hands to grip him by his damp shoulders as he upped his pace, his fingers working furiously inside me and his hand rubbing against my clit with hard, fast pressure. “*Bennett*.”

“Yes,” he rasped. “Say my fucking name when you come. Forget everything else. There is *nothing* else except my fingers in your pussy and my name on your lips.”

Jesus Christ, I was never going to come back from this. That fucking river took everything out of me, and now Bennett was just going to fill me back up with *him*.

“Bennett,” I gasped. I was wound so tight, teetering right on the edge. “Fuck, I’m going to come. Oh my God.”

Groaning, he drove his fingers harder, his free hand pinning me to the wall so that all I could do was stand there and *take* it.

And then Bennett Spencer, the boy I used to build blanket forts with and chase around the house with a plunger that I claimed was a sword, the boy I used to goad into a temper tantrum over games of Monopoly and slumber peacefully next to in a sleeping bag on the floor of his living room, dragged from me the very first orgasm I’d ever had that wasn’t by my own hand.

I screamed, pleasure rocketing from my core through my no-longer-numb limbs, and I gripped Bennett’s shoulders so hard he would be left with the imprint of my fingernails for days.

“Bennett!” I cried.

“Fuck *yes*,” he hissed. “Come for me.”

I whimpered, the aftershocks pulsing through me, and I was spent—finished, done for, never coming back. I slumped further down the wall, and he steadied me as my orgasm finally ebbed. We stared at each other, both of us panting now, and he finally pulled his hand from my panties.

He stepped away, disappearing out of the shower for a few seconds before he returned with a towel tossed around his shoulders. He moved in close, cupping my cheek with one hand and directing my attention back to his face again. The hard glint in his mossy eyes told me this hot little detour was now over, and we were getting back to business.

“Withdraw from Holywell and transfer to a new school next semester,” he said, his words somehow gentle but still dripping with authority. “If you try to come back here after the holidays, I’ll have your scholarship pulled.”

I could only give him a flat stare back. Arguing with him about this would accomplish nothing.

“You could have died!” he barked, irritated by my silence, and the flash of distress on his face as he uttered those words was so fleeting, I must have imagined it. “This ends now, Joanna. This is not the place for you.”

I sighed. I was so, *so* tired. “You can leave now, Bennett. Thanks for not letting me drown.”

He released his hold on my head, now staring down at me with a cold and calculating look. The silence that lingered between us was deafening, disturbed only by the sound of the slow drip of remaining water from the showerhead. He finally turned away, tossing his towel into a corner on the floor and stalking out of the locker room without a backward glance.

I stood in the empty shower, wrapped up in my towel, and I let the events of the evening finally sink in. Everything was so fucked up, and I needed to sleep for a week.

“Too bad I can’t do that,” I murmured to myself, lifting my hand to stare at what I’d been hiding in my clenched fist.

Bennett’s key ring dangled from my fingers, his Spencer Tower key fob glinting in the low light of the shower room like a priceless treasure.

My head was finally clear. It was time to fucking do this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



"Clear!" Max said in a low voice, his words amplified by the earpiece I wore in my right ear. "Entering back alley now."

We crept into the deserted alley behind Spencer Tower where the door to the internal fire escape stairwell was located. We knew from general reconnaissance that security guards occasionally used this spot for smoke breaks, but fortunately for whomever was on duty tonight, they'd decided not to time their break with our heist.

Max and I were both armed and were not going to hesitate to hurt anyone who got in our way—there was no time to fuck around. Once we used Bennett's fob to enter the building, we risked alerting anyone who might be monitoring the Heir's comings and goings that something unusual was going on. We were going in with brute force, if necessary, because this was our one shot at getting into James Spencer's personal safe.

It was also possible this would all be over before it began, depending on whether Bennett had already figured out his fob was missing and alerted Spencer security to revoke its access. I'd done my best to buy us time, breaking his key chain like it had been dropped and stepped on somewhere on the path from the docks to the locker room, and I'd strewn his car key haphazardly in the grass nearby. If he retraced his steps, he'd at least spend *some* time hunting for the fob on the vast lawn that separated the docks from the locker rooms.

It had been exactly ninety minutes since he'd left me in that shower. Adrenaline coursed through my veins at the prospect of finally getting into Spencer Tower, and it was the only reason I was able to keep my feet moving under me. Max hadn't been lying when he said everything was ready to go as soon as I pulled the trigger. We'd known that of all the jobs, this one was going to have the fastest running clock.

"External cameras have been handled," Dom said into our ears. "As have the cameras in the stairwell until you get to penthouse level, so be prepared."

Our team had attempted to hack the Spencer penthouse cameras many times, but they'd been unsuccessful. Fortunately, Spencer only kept security cameras on external entrances and in the one elevator with penthouse access. Like the Hargraves, they didn't want cameras in their most private space, no matter how unhackable they supposedly were.

"Showtime," I said as we approached the door. "Let's hope Bennett hasn't sounded the alarm yet."

I pulled the fob from the pocket of my black tactical pants and pressed it to the sensor next to the heavy gray door. It beeped, the lock on the door disengaging with a loud clunk, and we were in.

Then we began the long trek up sixty-five flights of hard, concrete stairs. It was eight thirty on a Friday night, so there was a chance we could encounter someone choosing to take the stairs between floors on this side of the building instead of waiting for an elevator, but fortunately for us, none of the tower's occupants chose to venture into the dank, cold staircase this evening.

By the fortieth floor I was sweating under my helmet and balaclava, and my legs were so goddamn tired already from my strenuous swim earlier tonight. Max had plied me with an energy bar and a smoothie on the way over here, but it hadn't cured the bone-deep exhaustion I felt from everything I'd endured.

That included Bennett making me come so hard I'd nearly lost feeling in my legs for a second time that night. I'd sort out my feelings about that another time.

"Come on, Jojo," Max urged, still taking the stairs two at a time with boundless energy. "Nearly there. We'll be in and out before you

know it, and then we'll go home and sleep for two days."

"Fuck yes," I replied, huffing as I willed my legs to just *move*. "I'm fine, I promise."

Finally—fucking *finally*—we reached the flight of stairs between the sixty-fourth and sixty-fifth floor, and we slowed our steps, pulling our guns from our belts once again.

Okay—Max had kept his gun aloft this entire time, but my arms were fucking tired, all right?

"Approaching penthouse entry," I said quietly.

"Camera will be positioned on the west-facing wall," Dom's voice informed us.

Max dropped low on the stairs and reached around the bottom of the landing to aim his gun at the camera.

"Disabling camera now."

With a quiet pop, he discharged his weapon, and the sharp crack of the camera's glass let us know he hit his target dead-on.

"Clear," I announced.

We moved swiftly onto the landing, and a nondescript lone black door awaited us.

"Moment of truth," I whispered, pulling Bennett's fob out once again. With any luck, he would still be scrambling around in the grass back at the Academy, looking for this little thing.

I held the fob to the small sensor next to the door, and with an audible pop, the lock disengaged.

Max pulled the door open wide enough for me to slip through. Holding his gun aloft, he followed me on light, quiet steps.

The entrance to the emergency exit in the Spencer penthouse was located down a small set of concrete steps at the corner of their pool deck—an expansive patio that jutted off of the lowest level of their three-story home at the very top of Spencer Tower.

I weathered the hard pang of nostalgia and longing that hit me as we skirted around the dark, quiet pool. The four of us Heirs had practically lived at each other's pools from Memorial Day to Labor Day every summer since we'd learned to swim, chauffeured around by whichever one of our nannies had been assigned the task at the time. Even shrouded in darkness, I could tell not much had changed

other than the fact that no more happy childhood memories were being made here and hadn't been for a long time.

"Pool deck is clear," Max reported to Dom. "There's a light on in the first-level living room."

We slinked along the outside railing, keeping out of view from inside the patio doors, and we prepared to enter the building.

"Spencer and his wife are still confirmed present at the Ferrero charity fundraiser at the Serpentis," Dom said, referencing one of Andrea's most profitable casinos. "And there's no sign of Bennett's car entering the vicinity."

I pulled the second gun I was wearing from my belt and checked it was loaded. "They don't keep a butler, but the housekeeper is probably here," I whispered. "Tranq gun at the ready."

"On three," Max murmured as we paused in the shadows up against the side of the building a few feet from the entrance. "One, two, three, *move*."

In one smooth motion, I darted to the door and swiped the fob across the sensor as Max pulled the door open. I slipped inside, entering the cavernous living room—dark except for the warm yellow glow of a single lamp on a nearby end table. Across the open floor plan and under the harsher light of the kitchen sconces, I spotted the dark gray bob of hair belonging to Mrs. Harris—the Spencers' longtime housekeeper and grouchiest woman alive—who was bustling around behind the sparkling white-marble kitchen counter.

I took aim at the back of her neck as I squeezed the trigger, and the dart flew from my gun with a soft pop.

She staggered, clutching at her neck, before she dropped to the spotless hardwood floor with an audible thud.

"First level is clear," I announced, motioning Max to follow me through the living room, across the expansive foyer, and to the stairs that led to the second and third levels.

"Get a move on," Dom urged. "We know the Spencer Enforcer team will have someone regularly monitoring the entries and exits from the penthouse, but we don't know how long it may take them to notice and flag the entry of Bennett's fob from the fire stairwell as odd—and that's if he hasn't already informed them it's missing."

We jogged up the stairs and hooked a left at the landing on the second floor. Tromping across the long, colorful rug lining the hallway that cost more than a luxury car, we headed straight for the door at the very end.

James Spencer's private study.

I ignored the open door to the oversized media room we passed on the way—too many memories, not enough time to deal with them.

We came to a stop at the closed white door, ready to pick the simple lock if necessary.

"Hell yeah," Max exclaimed under his breath when the knob turned with ease. "Someone got cocky."

"My dad never locked his study either," I whispered as we crept into the deserted office. I took in the floor-to-ceiling windows behind the large desk through which the bright lights of the City lent us enough light to allow a good view of the room. "At some point, you want to relax in your own home, you know? There's so much security already. Not that it helped him much in the end," I added with a sardonic scoff.

Max gave me his sympathetic eyes before he began casing the wall-to-wall bookshelves on the right-hand side of the study. "The safe is behind the books on one of these shelves?"

"Yeah, Bennett saw him access it once or twice as a kid and told us about it." We never had secrets from one another growing up, and it didn't seem like things had changed for them even after everything that had happened. What Bennett knew about his Family, the others likely did too.

"Oh, I see," Max said, and the happy dancing of his dark eyes told me he was grinning under his balaclava.

He yanked a row of books away from a shelf near the windows, and there was the small steel safe, neatly tucked back into an indention in the wall. "Ready?"

I nodded, moving in next to him. I pulled my tools from the small pouch on my belt and got to work.

With my tiny screwdriver, I removed the screws connecting the small battery that sat behind the safe's control panel. I slid the thin, rectangular battery out, then I disengaged the panel itself, pulling it away from the front of the safe and exposing the wiring behind it.

“Here,” I whispered to Max, yanking two of the colorful wires from their connection to the safe. “You’re on.”

Max pulled his little black box from his belt, plugging the two wires into it before entering a code.

The control panel beeped in my hand, and we were in.

“Do you want me to reset his passcode to fuck with him?” Max asked me as I pulled the safe’s small door open.

“Yeah. Set it to 080215.”

The night my parents were murdered. If he ever ventured to guess those numbers, he’d know we were fucking coming for him.

“Savage,” Max replied, his fingers flying over the keys of his black box.

I peered inside the safe. There were a few thin brown file folders arranged in a neat pile, and I spotted a small silver flash drive shoved into the back corner, its shiny coating glinting in the lights of the City streaming through the windows.

I handed Max the folders before grabbing the flash drive, and I gasped as I turned it over in my gloved hand.

“This is my dad’s,” I whispered, the familiar small white letters engraved on the drive just visible in the low light.

J. Knight.

“That’s a KnightKey500,” Max added, looking over my shoulder. “Those things have serious built-in encryption and require, like, a two-hundred-character key. And they’ll self-destruct after something like ten attempts to unlock it.”

I knew this. My dad always had this on him, never letting it out of his sight. I’d always assumed it was just where he kept whatever project he was currently tinkering with.

I pocketed it. It was mine now.

“Can you scan what’s in those folders so we can go through it later?” I asked Max as he started flipping through the papers.

“Yeah, I just need a few minutes,” he replied, digging in his pack.

“Hey, you two,” Dom’s hushed voice came over our earpieces. “The elevator that leads to the penthouse is on the move. Spencer’s still at the benefit, so it can’t be him. It may stop on one of the higher floors below, but wrap it up, please.”

“Shit.”

Max leafed through the folders, rapidly taking pictures with his phone that would upload immediately to our server to be stored and reviewed. I reinstalled the keypad back in its place on the front of the safe, and once Max had tossed the folders back inside, I closed the safe door with a firm shove.

We scrambled to put the books back on the shelf in an attempt to buy even a little bit of time before James Spencer noticed someone had been in his precious safe, and then we slipped quietly from the office and shut the door.

I crept along the second-floor hallway with Max on my heels, our feet shuffling silently on the rug. We just needed to get back downstairs and out to the fire stairwell once again, and then we were home free. I'd even leave Bennett's fob for him on the kitchen counter as a thank you.

Just as we began our descent down the stairs, the foyer coming back into view, the elevator announced its arrival at the penthouse level with a loud ding.

We froze. I grabbed for my tranq gun in case it was Bennett. I knew couldn't kill him.

The doors opened, and Frankie *fucking* Fingers came strolling out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Shit, shit, shit.

Max had frozen at my back, awaiting my command. Frankie had exited the elevator while scrolling on his phone with a bored—or maybe annoyed—look on his face, so I had exactly one second to decide if we were going to engage in a firefight with the most feared Enforcer in all the Families—or if we were going to make a break for it.

"*Plan B*," I hissed, turning on my heel and sprinting up the stairs after Max, who had leapt into action before I'd even finished speaking.

"Oh, what do we have here?" Frankie called out, our hasty retreat catching his attention.

"Shit! Get to the roof," Dom barked into our ears.

We heard the pounding of booted feet behind us as we crested the stairs and hit the second-floor landing.

"And here I thought tonight was going to be boring," Frankie said with a laugh as he ran after us. "Oh, come on! I just want to talk."

Fuck that.

I followed Max as he careened around the corner and ran for the next flight of stairs leading to the third floor, located just on the other side of one of the hall bathrooms.

"Shit!" I shouted as a shot sounded, a bullet entering the wall right next to my head.

Max whipped his gun from its holster and let loose a few shots in Frankie's general vicinity, the bullets pinging off the walls around him since Max was still running for the stairs and not taking the time to aim.

Frankie ducked and rolled out of the way, still laughing, then he got to his feet and charged after us again.

We took the next set of stairs two at a time, Max increasing the distance between us as my legs were beginning to fail me. I jerked out of the way as another shot ricocheted off a light fixture above me, and it was becoming clear that Frankie wasn't trying to hit me directly.

He wanted to take us alive.

We reached the top of the stairs, arriving on the third floor while Frankie gained on us with every stride.

"Take a right! End of the hallway!" I shouted at Max, directing him to the stairwell that led to the roof.

He took off and I followed—or I tried to, but a strong hand wrapped around my ankle and took me to the floor.

"Fuck!" I growled, spinning to kick Frankie in his face with my boot. He dodged, his body draped across the top of the stairs below me, and my blow glanced off his shoulder instead.

"Ouch, babe," he said with a chuckle. "That wasn't nice."

We struggled, and he pulled me down onto the stairs. I leaned forward and swung a punch at his head. He blocked it, knocking my fist back and trying to climb on top of me to hold me down. I kicked at him before I rolled, scrambling to get purchase with my boots on the stairs. He latched onto my backpack, jerking me backwards, and I slipped out of it before he could send me tumbling down the stairs to an inevitable broken neck.

Max came charging back around the corner, gun held high, and Frankie dove out of the way right as Max fired at him again.

Max grabbed my hand and hauled me to my feet, dragging me back up the last few stairs and down the hall. I got my sea legs back and sprinted behind him, headed for the last staircase that would take us to the roof of the Tower where Spencer kept his helipad.

Get Max to the roof. *Nothing else matters*.

Frankie ran after us, recovering with impressive speed from his dive down the stairs. He fired shot after shot, one finally catching Max in his Kevlar vest. Max grunted, staggering a bit, and in that moment, my world tilted, my stomach dropped to the floor, and my legs tried to give out on me as I stumbled.

“I’m okay!” Max called, bounding to the stairs and beginning to climb. “Come on, Jojo, we’re almost there!”

Breathing hard, I recovered, but not in time.

Frankie pounced on me, taking me to my stomach on the bottom half of the stairs.

“Shit!” Max was already at the top, and he turned to race back down.

“No! Go!” I shouted at him.

I yanked my knife from the sheath on my thigh, and then I rammed it backwards with everything I had into the hard body pinning me down.

“Ow, Jesus, babe,” Frankie hissed, the blade entering the meaty flesh of his thigh.

I shoved him off me just in time for Max to pull me back to my feet again. We raced to the top of the stairs, flicked the deadbolt on the heavy door, and barreled through to the roof.

Max shoved the door closed, and we both jogged over to the nearest edge of the building, coming to a stop at the solid steel railing that ran around the rooftop’s perimeter.

“Ready?” Max asked, turning to me, and then his eyes widened in horror. “Where’s your pack?” he gasped.

I smiled ruefully. “Lost it on the stairs between the second and third floor wrestling with Frankie.” I motioned urgently to the railing. “You have to go, Max. There’s no way he hasn’t alerted the Spencer Enforcer team by now. The two of us can’t fight our way back out of here alone.”

“No,” he said fiercely, grabbing me by my biceps with both of his strong hands. “No fucking way. I am not leaving you here with that psychopath!”

“You have to.”

“No!” He shook his head violently, squeezing my arms tight.

“Max, *please* go,” I begged, my voice cracking. I blinked away the tears that threatened to well in my eyes. I had to be strong. “You *promised* me. You promised before we ever started this that if it came down to it, you would save yourself. This is *my* war. I can’t watch them hurt you, Max. I won’t do it.”

“Jojo, *no*. I can’t,” he cried. A lone tear leaked from his eye, and the pain I felt in my damaged soul was devastating.

I hadn’t known I could feel things like that anymore.

“You have to. They won’t kill me, Max. They’ll want information first. We have contingencies for this. You guys will get me back out in no time.” My eyes were desperate—imploring him to listen. “*Please*. I can’t let them have you. It would be so much worse.”

The door banged open behind us.

“Go now!” I shouted at him.

“Fuck this so much,” he spat, finally letting me go and climbing the railing. He looked back at me over his shoulder. “I love you, but fuck this so, *so* much.”

He launched himself over the side, and I hurried to the edge, leaning over to watch as he fell. After a few seconds, he pulled his parachute, the black, rectangular fabric shooting from his pack and catching him in the air. He sailed gracefully away, disappearing behind the neighboring towers and into the darkness.

“We’ll get you out, honey,” Dom murmured in my ear, not quite hiding the wobble in his voice. “Don’t worry.”

“I know,” I whispered back.

A gun cocked behind me. I let out a defeated breath, my shoulders sagging.

“That was impressive,” Frankie said with a low whistle. “Here I thought I was finally going to be able to corral you both up here for a little chat. I wasn’t expecting a BASE jump. And I pulled this off you entirely by accident!”

I turned to face him. He held his handgun aloft in one hand, aiming it straight at my head, and he lifted my pack in his other hand, taunting me with it.

I crossed my arms and stared him down. I wouldn’t show these people fear.

Never.

Frankie walked toward me, favoring his injured leg a little bit. He'd removed my knife, but blood now soaked through the thigh of his ripped, acid-washed jeans. He wore another ratty homemade tank top, this one with "Nirvana" scrawled across the front in neon blue, and his dark hair flopped onto his sweaty forehead.

"Good. I see you're ready to behave," he purred. "I'm just very *curious*, you see. I really wasn't expecting this excitement when my dear nephew asked me to do a quick check on things up here since I was already at work in the basement."

He stopped in front of me, dropping my pack to the ground beside us, and he reached up to pull my balaclava down, exposing my face. The seconds felt like hours as he studied me, and then his eyes widened.

He barked out an incredulous laugh. "I'd been wondering just who it was that had the balls to break into James Spencer's fucking house. But of course—it's *you*, Little Knight."

My mouth fell open. I could only stare at him, speechless.

He lowered his gun, letting it hang loose in his hand at his side, and a wide smile broke out across his striking face. "And I thought Andrea was being so obnoxiously paranoid claiming someone had been in her basement office and moved her things an eighth of an inch out of place. But I bet that was you too?"

I just continued to gape at him.

"Shit, I apologize." He pulled me into a ridiculous bear hug. "How have you been? *Where* have you been?"

"Frankie, I-I…." I stammered.

"Fuck, you know what? Don't tell me. I can't *wait* to see how this all plays out."

He released me, stepping back to look into my face again. "I like the purple eyes. That's a nice touch."

"They're violet," I mumbled, still dazed.

"Sure, sure," he said, bending over to pick up my backpack. He held it out to me. "Here. You better get going. The boss will be home soon."

I took my pack from him wordlessly, still stunned I wasn't being hauled off to the *basement* to be wrung for information until my team could figure out how to extract me.

He busted out another laugh, clapping his hands like this was the greatest thing ever. “Things are about to get shaken up here in our fair City. I’m looking forward to it.”

Then he nudged me toward the railing.

“Um,” I began. “Thanks?”

“Don’t mention it, Little Knight,” he said, turning to head back down into the penthouse with a surprising amount of pep in his step for someone who’d just taken a knife to the thigh. “See ya later!” he called over his shoulder.

“Bye, Frankie,” I mumbled.

He pulled the heavy door open and disappeared through it, the loud clang of it slamming closed echoing across the otherwise silent roof top.

I let out the world’s biggest sigh of relief. “Did you get all of that?”

“Yep,” Dom replied, also sounding extremely relieved. “So, you know what this means, right?”

I hoisted my pack onto my back and fastened the straps across my chest. “Fuck. Dom, I’m not ready. I still don’t have anything on *why* my parents were murdered.”

“I know, but we agreed. If you’re ever made, we move straight to Phase Two. It’s safer for you that way.”

Fuck. He was right, of course.

I pulled my balaclava up over my nose and mouth again, tightened my helmet, and climbed onto the railing.

“I’ll call Mari,” I said as I took in the twinkling lights of the City below me. “She’ll be able to help, and I trust her.”

“I agree,” he replied. “I let Max know you’re okay. He’ll meet you at the rendezvous point we set for Plan B.”

“Got it. Love you. See you at home.”

“Love you too, honey.”

Then I jumped, my body cutting sharply through the cold night air as I fell. After a few seconds, I released my parachute. As I floated down, navigating my way through the City’s skyscrapers and away from Spencer Tower, every ounce of energy I’d reached so deep to find to survive this entire fucked-up night left my body. I sagged in my straps, and I made peace with what I was going to have to do.

This was a fucking war, after all, and I came to win.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BENNETT



"I swear to God, these things get more painful every year," Zach griped, taking a giant swig of his bourbon. "When can we leave, again?"

"Stop bitching," I told him for the third time. "My father is here as the guest of honor, which means we don't leave until he does. You know that."

I glanced across the dining hall, which had been cleared of the usual long tables and decorated wall-to-wall with sparkling holiday frivolity, at where Father stood talking to Benedict Hendrickson and Edward Jansen. My mother clutched his arm, dressed in a beautiful white gown, and the bland look on her face told me she'd medicated herself enough to get through yet another one of these events at his side.

"You'd think they'd occasionally attempt to honor someone outside our Families at this thing," Noah added, absently adjusting his glasses as he cast his lazy stare around the room. "The Academy could try harder to pretend it exists for more than kissing our parents' asses."

Zach smirked. "We get our asses kissed plenty too, dude."

I rolled my eyes. I was tired, and the last place I wanted to be right now was at the Holywell Academy Holiday Ball, dressed in a tux and taking pains to drink just enough to take the edge off without

getting anywhere close to tipsy. We were navigating not only our fellow students tonight, but many parents and other representatives from top Tier families, and even a few members of the press.

“You getting your ass kissed tonight, Ferrero?” Noah asked, tossing a knowing smile at Zach. “Lisa has sure been… aggressive.”

He snorted. “You can say that again. She slipped me her panties about five minutes after we got here.”

I was about to roll my eyes again, but he pulled a tiny scrap of red lace from the pocket of his tux pants, so I ended up choking a bit on my drink instead.

“Wow,” I said, waving away the roving waiter who’d stopped to offer me something from his tray of hors d'oeuvres. “I guess I’m not that surprised.” And I was lucky Harper wasn’t yet at that level of throwing herself at me—but she was betting on a binding contract that would take care of that for her.

I side-eyed Zach. “If you feel like indulging, just do it. We trust you to be careful enough.”

He sighed, darting a look over at a nearby cocktail table, where Lisa, Harper, Annie, and several of the other girls from top families hovered. Each wore a couture ballgown and sipped champagne from the flutes they daintily clutched between their manicured fingers, every one of them acting like they felt something other than vicious contempt for the others.

“Nah, man,” Zach replied. “That’s a net I don’t have the energy to untangle myself from right now.”

“Maybe you should go for it,” Noah muttered, pasting a smile on his face as he waved at Annie’s parents, Dr. and Mrs. Ling. “Maybe then you’ll stop moping about Joanna finally doing the *right* thing and leaving school.”

“I am not *moping*,” he fired back. “We all agreed she needed to go. It’s just… slightly more boring around here without the Princess. I’m still a little shocked she finally caved.”

Honestly, I was too. She was so obstinate, so fucking *infuriating*, and had no regard for her safety whatsoever.

She lived to get under my skin.

“You didn’t see how fucked up she was after I pulled her out of the river,” I replied. “I told you she was borderline hypothermic and in

the middle of a full-blown panic attack. I'd have thrown in the towel after that too."

Noah sighed. He'd taken the news of Harper's latest attempt to punish Joanna Miller for refusing to bow to her betters—and for inexplicably having *our* attention more than she should have—the hardest. He'd somehow weathered the storm of the last seven years right alongside Zach and me and was the only one who'd managed to cling to something resembling compassion.

"Yeah," he said. "Hopefully she's really gone. Not that she could come back next semester anyway, since you had her scholarship revoked."

She hadn't been seen on campus since I left her in that shower, still shaking from the hottest orgasm I'd ever witnessed—the result of what I could only describe as a complete loss of my self-control.

It was something she continued to bring out in me despite how hard I tried to resist it, and standing there with my hands on her trembling, dripping wet body had pushed me over the edge.

She didn't show up for the Chase on Saturday, much to Harper's delight, and she hadn't been in any of her classes over this past final week of the semester. Noah pulled her grades and informed us that she'd turned in all outstanding assignments, so hopefully she took her semester's worth of credit and transferred to a school on the opposite side of the country where she would be forgotten by all of us.

Joanna Miller was a *siren*. Distracting, untrustworthy—we still didn't know how she'd managed to neuter Chad Hendrickson, and that was unsettling.

"How pissed is your dad still, Bennett?" Zach asked, catching my father's hard stare in our direction.

"Very." I was lucky he hadn't ordered Frankie to hang me from the ceiling in the Club's basement.

"Whatever. He'll get over it. We took care of it by getting Frankie up there to chase those criminals out before they could take anything, even if he wasn't able to actually catch them. He can't fault you for losing your keys while you were saving a life."

I snorted. "He can and he will. And he still can't get into his safe, so we don't know for sure nothing was taken."

Even I didn't know what he had in there, but he was extremely agitated about it, whatever it was.

"What the fuck is *he* doing here?" Noah spat suddenly, glaring at the hall's entrance.

Zach and I turned to see who in the world had gotten on *Noah's* bad side like that. Entering the hall was Mari Anzaldua, and she was clutching the arm of Max Miller. Instead of his usual shit-eating grin, Max's face was grim, and Mari's eyes were red and puffy, as if she'd been crying.

Zach turned back to Noah. "What's your problem with Princess's cousin, man?"

"He just pisses me off."

"Runs in the family," I remarked dryly.

The low melody of carols that had been playing over the hall's speakers cut out, followed by the sharp feedback of a microphone switching on.

"Yes, hello. May I have your attention, please?"

Dean Jansen, clad as always in a professional skirt suit, stood at the mic stand that had been set up on the dais where the three of us normally ate our meals. It was the stage for the evening, the sides draped with silky gold fabric and the edges lined with poinsettias, all for the sole purpose of giving my father yet another bullshit award.

The ambient noise of the large crowd quieted as we all turned our attention to the stage.

"Thank you all for yet another successful semester at Holywell and a wonderful Holiday Ball, none of which would be possible, of course, without the generosity of the Four Families of Saint Gabriel City." The dean beamed an indulgent smile down at my father. "This evening, it is my *great* pleasure to honor our special guest—"

She was cut off as the doors to the hall flew open with a loud bang.

A woman strode confidently into the hall, the crowd parting for her like magic as she marched with purpose straight toward the stage. She wore a deep-red dress that billowed around her as she walked, the high slit teasing glimpses of her long leg and towering stiletto heels.

"Wait, is that…?" Noah murmured, his eyes glued to the girl.

“The Princess?” Zach finished, confused. “What did she do to her hair?”

It certainly looked like Joanna. I knew that body—tall, lithely muscled, legs for days. The confident set of her jaw, visible in her profile as she stalked past where we stood near the middle of the room, was something I’d spent a lot of time staring at over the semester. But that dress was high fashion and much more expensive than she could ever afford, and her hair, expertly styled in cascading waves rather than thrown into her usual ponytail, was no longer dark brown. Instead, it was a striking light blonde.

Almost white.

Painful memories assaulted me.

“Excuse me, Dean,” she called as she reached the front of the stage, craning her neck up to stare at Dean Jansen. “I need to say a few words, if you don’t mind.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Dean Jansen demanded. “Who….” She stared down at her in confusion, and whatever she saw had her suddenly backing away from the microphone, her eyes wide and her jaw agape, like she’d seen a ghost.

Joanna gracefully climbed the stage, and then she turned, head held high as she clutched the microphone stand, and her eyes snapped right to mine.

Noah gasped.

“Her eyes,” Zach hissed, his voice suddenly shaky. “Look at her fucking *eyes*.”

Eyes the unique shade of aquamarine I knew so well stared back at me. It was the color forever burned into my brain from both my most cherished memories and the worst night of my life—of *our* lives.

“It… it can’t be,” I sputtered.

“Good evening, Holywell Academy,” she said into the microphone, surveying the room like a regal queen. “If you’ll just excuse the brief interruption, I’d like to just say a few words before we get to our *guest of honor*.” She spat those last words, refusing to look my father’s way, as if he was beneath her.

He stood next to his table at the front of the room, and the horrified look that had broken through his stern mask said he’d come

to the same realization we had.

“How could… how could this be?” Noah whispered. “She can’t be her.”

“You all know me as Joanna Miller, freshman and scholarship student here at Holywell—a *street kid* trying to claw and scrape my way out of the Southside by rubbing elbows with the elite of the City. I’ve been reminded constantly during my time here that I don’t belong.”

Confused murmurs surrounded us. Scoffing and complaining could be heard from students.

“You don’t, you trashy skank,” Harper said loudly, and her mother tried to shut her up with a harsh, worried look. “What? Why are we letting her talk?”

My hands shook. The dean had known Kerstin Knight well, and the version of Joanna Miller that stood before us now looked an awful lot like Kerstin had before she died.

“Harper, sweetheart,” Joanna said, shooting her a condescending look dripping with fake sympathy. “I suggest your shut your mouth and listen to what I have to say. You’ll be interested to hear it, I promise.”

“Could she be… impersonating her?” Zach whispered. “She’s *dead*. They told us she was dead!”

But she hadn’t been when she left that room. I’d known it. Sometimes I thought I’d imagined it.

But they *told* us. They’d said they’d killed her too.

“I thought it might be interesting for you all to hear how I came to be at Holywell,” Joanna went on, projecting her voice across the now eerily silent dining hall. “As it turns out, the story involves your guest of honor.”

She finally looked his way, and the look of raw, visceral hatred she gave my father at that moment made my stomach drop to my fucking feet.

“It’s her,” I whispered.

Zach let out a completely humorless chuckle. “Well, that explains a lot, doesn’t it?”

She continued, her voice strong and sure. “When I was eleven years old, I was torn from my bed in my own home. I was hit over the

head with the butt of a gun until I lost consciousness."

Fuck.

"Oh, God," Noah breathed.

I glanced at him. His eyes shone with unshed tears.

It was like we were back in that god-awful fucking conference room, reliving it all again.

"When I came to, I was on the floor of a strange room, bleeding profusely from the head. Unfortunately for me, I regained consciousness just in time to hear our guest of honor, James Spencer, shoot my father to death."

Loud gasps sounded. Voices rose in the room.

My father, a head of one of the Four Families, had just been accused of murder.

A murder he'd absolutely committed.

The members of the press in the room had moved to the front of the stage and were now filming her with their phones.

"Fuck, she heard it all happen," Zach moaned under his breath. "Fuck. *Fuck*."

Her eyes found Zach's. We knew what was next.

"And then my screaming, sobbing mother, who had just witnessed my father's murder, threw herself in front of my limp body just in time to be shot by Andrea Ferrero. She sounded so thrilled to do it too."

Zach swallowed audibly, but he held her stare with unwavering confidence.

And longing.

It was *her*.

Her eyes moved to Noah.

"And then, of course, I heard Peter Hargraves congratulate the twelve-year-old boys in the room, who they'd just forced to watch as their best friend and her family were murdered right in front of them, on a job well done."

Noah could only stare back at her, wearing every ounce of the heartbreak we were all feeling on his face.

My chest felt like it was caving in.

"I'd played dead this entire time, you see," she continued, tearing her eyes from Noah's before she was back to glaring at Father. "And

I suppose I was fortunate that even our illustrious heads of the Families were too chickenshit to shoot an unconscious eleven-year-old girl. I was carried from that room alongside the bodies of my dead parents, and then I was tossed into the back seat of an Enforcer SUV. While the two lucky men charged with ensuring I ended up as dead as my parents argued over who had to do it, I jumped from the car and threw myself into the Obsidian."

Her eyes fell on me again, burning into my fucking soul. I stood there, desperately hanging onto my emotionless mask, and just took it all, the disturbing images assaulting me from back then and from just a few days ago.

The river.

The panic attack.

She swam for her fucking life in that river after her parents had been killed in front of her.

Noah looked at me, stricken. He'd realized it too.

"Somehow, I didn't drown out there," she said, now looking directly at Harper, who still looked only annoyed by this spectacle.

She hadn't figured it out yet.

"I made it to the docks in Olde Town. I was taken in by a kind family who has become my whole world." She beamed down at Max, who smiled back at her, his chest swelling with pride.

I was with Noah now. I hated him.

"You see, I haven't been sitting on my hands, crying over the loss of my parents and hiding all this time. I spent the last seven years on the Southside preparing for this day. I came to Holywell Academy to do one thing and one thing only—to avenge my parents by taking back what's *mine*."

Dread was creeping into every part of my body. As if the revelation wasn't enough that the mouthy, troublemaking, unbearably *hot* scholarship student we'd spent the semester *dealing with* was actually our dead best friend—it sounded like things were about to get much worse.

"She's been fucking with us this entire time," Zach said, blowing out a breath.

"Why?" Noah asked, his low whisper despondent. "Why not just tell us who she was? We would have protected her!"

She looked out over the crowd again. “Before I leave tonight, I will be handing to the lovely members of the press who are in attendance a few things. I have a copy of camera footage from Peter Hargraves’ personal server that will show each head of the Families entering a conference room in Hargraves Tower on the night of August 2nd, 2015. It will also show my family being dragged in, very much alive, and then carried out, very much not.”

“How did she…?” Noah murmured, bewildered. “She got into my dad’s library?”

“I also have a copy of the SIM card of Andrea Ferrero’s burner phone that confirms her orders to her Enforcers to have my family kidnapped and delivered to Hargraves Tower on that night.”

“Goddamn it,” Zach cursed, shock still coloring his every word. “Mom has been bitching about someone being in her office. How the *fuck* did she get down there?”

I knew, just like I knew what was coming next.

“And I have a scanned copy of a document taken directly from James Spencer’s personal safe, signed by all three remaining heads of the Families, whereby they voted to *eliminate* my entire family for the simply stated reason of ‘disloyalty.’”

My father’s face was somehow both pale from shock and flushed with rage.

“She’s the one who stole your fob,” Zach whispered.

“Obviously,” I spat. She’d also apparently jumped off the top of Spencer Tower with a fucking parachute.

There was so much we’d missed. So much we didn’t know.

We’d been staring our dead best friend in the face for an entire semester—the girl whose absence all three of us still felt as profoundly as a phantom limb—and we’d had no goddamn idea.

And she’d been playing us like chumps.

“If you haven’t already figured it out, let me spell it out for you all,” she boomed into the microphone, her knuckles white where they were wrapped around the microphone stand. “My name is Jolie Marie Knight. I’m the daughter of Jeffrey and Kerstin Knight, who were *not* killed in an unfortunate plane crash in the Bahamas but instead murdered by the very people they were closest to. I am here to take back what’s mine, and then I am coming for what’s yours, Mr.

Spencer.” She held my father’s livid glare with the confidence of an equal. “When I’m through with you, the institution of the Four Families will be in ruins, and if the rest of you don’t want to play by my rules, I will happily sit on the docks of Olde Town and watch while the City burns to *fucking* ashes.”

Those aquamarine eyes met mine one last time, and they shone with so much righteous anger, so much defiance, and so much *power*, that I didn’t know whether to be frightened, enraged, or turned the fuck on.

Jolie.

Our Jojo.

Back from the dead.

And she was here to destroy us.



To be continued…

BONUS SCENE

NOAH - THE FIRST DAY IN THE DINING HALL



Bennett threw open the dining hall's heavy wooden doors, and every head in the cavernous room jerked in our direction. The loud chatter turned to reverent whispers as the three of us strode down the center aisle between the long banquet tables.

It was the start of another year at Holywell Academy.

Another year of playing the princes while the children of the City's wealthiest families vied for our attention.

Another year of the smallest respite from our parents and the bullshit of the Families.

Another year closer to graduation, access to our trust funds, and the tiny kernel of freedom we, the three remaining Heirs of the Four Families, dreamed of.

I tamped down the pinch of suffocating anguish that always threatened to surface when I thought of Bennett, Zach, and me as *the remaining Heirs*.

"Fuck me, I'm tired of this already," Zach groused as we climbed the short stairs onto the dais where our parents required us to eat our meals on display like zoo animals. "Let's get on the Hargraves jet back to the lake in Montana where we spent Bennett's birthday, with no one to bother us but the fucking fish."

“Whining is not going to make getting through this meal any easier,” Bennett replied as he pulled his chair from the table and sat with the air of a CEO ready to be unimpressed by his underlings.

Zach flopped into the seat on Bennett’s left, loosening his already loose tie and conspicuously rolling up his shirtsleeves so his adoring public could ogle his tattooed forearms. I took my place on Bennett’s right and was promptly accosted by Annie Ling as she approached our table along with the usual group of top students who thought they deserved our attention.

“Hi, Noah,” she said with that breathy voice girls loved to turn on around all three of us. She placed a manicured hand on the table so she could lean over as she spoke to me, allowing me an unobstructed view down the front of her silky blouse. “How was the rest of your summer? I’ve missed you since our parents last got us together.”

I smothered the eye roll that threatened to emerge, hanging onto my polite smile with the ease beaten into me by years of representing my Family. I also managed to resist the urge to glance at the tits I was being freely offered—I liked tits as much as any other person attracted to women, but we had an audience, for Christ’s sake. “My summer was good, Annie, thank you for asking. Is your father enjoying his spot on the board of Hargraves’ latest little venture?”

She waved her hand with a little huff. “I’m sure he is, but I don’t want to talk about *him*. I was hoping we could get together again soon, Noah. I so enjoyed our conversation the last time I saw you, and I’m just *dying* to continue it.”

This was my penance for drinking two Manhattans to tolerate the rare presence of my dad in our home, which caused me to return Annie’s overtures with some light flirting of my own when she and her parents had come to dinner to kiss my dad’s ass a month ago.

Bennett snorted next to me, obviously listening in while he gave anyone who dared approach him a look that screamed, “Go fuck yourself, peasant.” I’d remember this the next time Harper Jansen decided to hang off his arm like a barnacle.

“I’m sure there will be plenty of opportunities for us to chat this year, Annie,” I replied, smooth as silk.

“Mmm, I can’t wait.” She turned to look over her shoulder at an approaching pair of freshmen girls I recognized from other Hargraves-connected Tier One families, and she practically hissed at them. They glared at her but turned on their sky-high heels and scampered back to their table.

Our small talk was interrupted when Chad Hendrickson, a Spencer-connected Tier One sophomore who wanted into the Heirs’ inner circle in the worst fucking way, hopped on top of one of the banquet tables below us.

“Greetings, new students of Holywell Academy! It’s that time again!” Chad shouted over the noise of the crowd, and the room quieted in an instant.

These sharks smelled blood.

“I hate this,” I muttered.

Bennett was still as a statue next to me. “My father was so thrilled when Hendrickson bragged about this shit last year,” he muttered under his breath. “If we kill it, I’ll never hear the fucking end of it.”

“The scholarship students need to get slapped with a cold, hard dose of the truth of what this place is, anyway,” Zach added in his lazy drawl. “If they can’t hack it, they can find somewhere fucking *normal* to go to college.”

I agreed with that, actually, but it didn’t make me feel like any less of an asshole.

“It’s a new year at Holywell, and we have all been *uniquely* blessed to be able to attend school alongside the *Heirs* of the Four Families who, for generations, have been responsible for the incredible prosperity of our fair City!” Claps, cheers, and a few wolf-whistles rang out, spurring Chad right along. “And because we are so lucky to have the Heirs at the Academy, some of us felt it was a great opportunity for those of you who are here on *scholarship* to be able to *personally* thank the Families for providing someone of your station the rare opportunity to receive the finest education in the country while walking the same halls as the next generation of leaders of this City.”

“His head is getting too big,” Bennett grumbled.

Zach watched Chad with a penetrating stare, its depth obscured by his usual cocky smirk. “I’ll beat it out of him at Fight Night if it gets

to be a problem."

"And so, we will be continuing the tradition we began last year for all of you lucky scholarship students! When I call your name, come on up!"

We were treated then, just as we were at this time last year, to a parade of terrified or dejected scholarship students as they were made to kneel in front of us. Chad called them up one at a time, his sadistic smile growing with every name, and he forced them to recite this bullshit oath to us, the Heirs, thanking us for the opportunity to mix with their betters and swearing to know their place here.

I was so fucking uncomfortable, but I'd done a lot of uncomfortable shit in the name of the Families. This was no different. I let my thoughts wander away from the spectacle in front of us, lest I slip and give someone a sympathetic smile.

After several long excruciating minutes of this, Chad hit a bump in the road that knocked me back into the present.

"Is there a Joanna Miller here? Freshman scholarship student, crew team, graduate of Southside High School…."

Interesting. Was someone refusing to kneel?

A shriek I recognized as belonging to Bennett's would-be betrothed, Harper Jansen, rang out with a scandalized little gasp. "Seriously? They're letting Southside trash in here now?"

The Southside was where the City's poorest citizens lived. It wasn't unheard of for a kid from what the City's rich referred to as "the slums" to make it into Holywell, but it was definitely notable—and not in a good way.

"She's over here, Chad!" a voice called from the middle of the room.

Everyone turned to get a glimpse of the Southside girl who apparently dared to defy Chad—and the Heirs—on the first damn day of school. Chad found her easily, as did I when I finally spotted the scowling girl, arms crossed defiantly over her chest and dressed way too casually in a T-shirt.

"Oh, I see you, Southside," Chad said with an evil smile. "Hop to it. The Heirs don't have all day."

I thought I caught a smirk on her—fuck me, *gorgeous*—face before her challenging glare returned. "No, thanks!" she shouted at

Chad.

“Well, *this* is interesting,” Zach said, perking right up in his chair. I didn’t doubt he’d spotted our Southside rebel and had the same thoughts I did about her looks.

I wouldn’t have said that Southside public high school was the vibe I was usually into, but the way this girl looked Chad right in his face with the confidence of an equal on her first day in this cesspool was impressive as hell.

Also really fucking stupid, but I couldn’t help but admire her tenacity.

Bennett had stiffened next to me, his intense stare now also directed at the girl.

Chad, for his part, was turning the shade of a tomato. “Wrong answer, Southside,” he barked. “Get up here and get on your knees, or you won’t like the consequences.”

The girl stood up from her chair, and for a split second, relief that she’d seen sense warred with an odd pang of disappointment that she’d given in so easily. But then she tossed her backpack over her shoulder and shoved a pair of white earbuds into her ears, and I knew she wasn’t on her way up here to prostrate herself at our feet.

She marched into the aisle, giving us a better view of her lithe body draped in that soft-looking T-shirt and fitted, ripped jeans. She’d pulled her dark hair into a simple messy ponytail, and her ratty sneakers were a faded purple. The lean muscle of her pale arm flexed as she walked, and those jeans hugged a tight, perfect ass.

“Holy fuck, that girl is *hot*,” Zach whispered, sounding almost awestruck.

She sure was.

As she reached the aisle, she turned, giving us her back.

The gasps from the student body were almost comical.

She paused, tossing one last insubordinate look over her shoulder.

Were her eyes purple?

“Shove it up your ass, Chad,” she said with a little tilt of her chin.

Then she turned and marched right on out of the hall.

I stared after her, trying not to gape.

The scandalized whispers began immediately.

“I think I’m in love,” Zach announced to Bennett and me.

“Cut the shit, this is a fucking disaster,” Bennett snapped between clenched teeth.

“And Chad’s about to go off like a geyser,” I added, gesturing to where he still stood on the table below us, glaring daggers at the doorway. “What was she thinking? Is she that clueless?”

Zach chuckled. “They make them scrappy on the Southside, man. And apparently hella sexy. Maybe we should take a sightseeing trip down there sometime.”

Chad finally turned to us, pasting an apologetic look on his flushed face. “I won’t let this sort of blatant disrespect for the Heirs stand,” he declared. “Dane, Cameron, and I will drag her back in here and fucking *force* her onto her knees.”

“Yeah!” A chorus of cheers went up at the tables nearest to us—the students with the highest status and closest connections to the Four Families.

Dane and Cameron hopped to their feet like good little soldiers. My stomach knotted.

Fortunately, even Bennett was hiding a hint of restraint under his five-thousand-dollar suit. “Hendrickson,” he rumbled, commanding the attention of the entire hall. “Leave it.”

Relief washed through my veins. Standing by while those three meatheads physically assaulted a girl was not something I wanted to have to do in the name of the Families, though I had a sneaking suspicion it was going to come to that if this *Joanna Miller* continued to walk these halls with her head held high instead of cowering to her “betters.”

I didn’t exactly want to see that pretty face—or that vibrant spirit—broken.

She really did not belong here.

“I…. Seriously?” Chad asked.

Bennett continued to stare at him like he was irritated to even be breathing the same air. “Did I stutter?”

“Fuck, sorry. Got it, Spencer. I’ll just… carry on.”

And he did. The rest of the scholarship students did as they were ordered without question.

When the torturous ritual finally concluded, the students went back to their meals, and Zach decided to poke at Bennett—one of his favorite pastimes.

“Didn’t know you were such a bleeding heart, Spencer,” he said, tossing his last piece of bacon into his mouth. “Or did that little spitfire actually wake your dick up? I’m still half hard over her telling Chad to his actual face to shove it up his ass. She might be worth breaking our rules for.”

I resisted the urge to pout. We didn’t date or fuck our peers and classmates anymore, all three of us having learned some hard lessons in the past, but that girl was tempting—especially for me.

Fuck, I would’ve *loved* to tame that brat.

But if I didn’t get to have her, Zach didn’t either.

Luckily, Bennett, ever the cautious one, put his foot down. “That’s the worst idea you’ve ever had. She’s clearly here to cause trouble.”

“Admit she’s hot,” Zach goaded.

“I’ll admit it,” I chimed in lightly, fueling the fire.

“She’s trouble,” he said again, then he sighed. “There *is* something about her though. What the fuck is it?”

Wow, even Bennett Spencer was ensnared. There were attractive, well-bred girls under every rock at this Academy—hell, in this City—who would get on their backs for him with a snap of his fingers, and I’d never seen him look at one twice.

As the worry crept back in, I said, “They’re going to destroy her in this place. That thought is… concerning to me.”

“I think it’ll be quite the show,” Zach said with a lazy shrug of his shoulder.

Bennett was quiet for a few seconds, all three of us watching as students began to file out of the hall, the clock having announced five minutes until the start of classes. He stood up, adjusting his tie and smoothing his jacket as he looked between the two of us. “We don’t allow trouble and bullshit in this Academy. It will piss our parents off and fall on us to fix it. She’s out of here if this gets any worse.”

I sighed. “Agreed.”

“I’m ready for the fireworks,” Zach said.

Bennett and I both just stared at him.

“Fine,” he said, holding his hands up in defeat. “Agreed.”

We began our own procession out of the hall, and try as I might, I couldn’t pull my mind away from the beautiful girl from the slums with the sad, defiant purple eyes.

SEIZE THE CASTLE

A KNIGHT'S REVENGE BOOK 2



PROLOGUE

NOAH - AGE 12



"Noah!"

I ran faster. Jolie's screams were desperate, and I had to find her.

Someone was hurting her.

"Jojo!" I called out, panicked.

"Noah, help me!"

Where was she? These halls all looked the same.

Offices, conference rooms, break rooms with big refrigerators and little tables.

"Noah!"

A light shone from an open door at the end of the hall. I sprinted for it, somehow knowing it was the right place.

"Jojo!"

I tripped over nothing and fell into the room. Bennett and Zach were already here, standing next to the wall and staring into the middle of the room with blank looks on their faces.

Jolie lay on the floor. Her head was bleeding, and she was crying.

"Oh my God! Bennett! Zach! We have to do something!" I cried, running for her.

They didn't answer. I looked over at them, so confused about why they weren't helping her, and then I looked back at the floor.

She was gone.

“No!”

I woke up, my scream painful against my hoarse throat.

“Hey,” Bennett whispered from next to me. “Noah. It was just a dream.” He grabbed my hand from where he lay beside me in our sleeping bags on the floor of my room.

“It wasn’t though,” I said, and a loud sob escaped my throat. “It wasn’t a dream. She’s really dead!”

Bennett didn’t say anything. He just held my hand while I continued to cry, letting all of the tears out that I wasn’t able to last night when our parents killed our best friend and her parents right in front of us.

For reasons we had no idea about. To *test* us.

“Where’s… where’s Zach?” I asked, hiccupping. The sleeping bag on my other side was empty.

“Here,” Zach said quietly.

I looked over at the window seat of my bedroom where Zach sat perched on the cushion, slouched against the foggy pane.

His eyes were tired—red rimmed and bloodshot in the faint glow that shone through the window from the City lights. His black hair was wild.

And he had a big kitchen knife clutched in his hand, his eyes glued to the door like he was watching for invaders.

He hadn’t slept, I realized.

Bennett sat up in his sleeping bag, pulling me up to sit with him.

“I…,” he began, swallowing hard. A tear leaked down his cheek, and I knew he was trying so hard to hold it together for us. “I don’t know why our parents did that. Jolie’s dad must have done something really bad to deserve that kind of… *punishment*.”

“*She* didn’t do anything though!” I cried. “Why did they do that to her?”

“Father said those are the rules,” Bennett replied sadly. “The rules of the Four Families when one Family betrays the others.”

“Screw the rules,” Zach muttered from the window. “The rules suck. Our parents are psychos.”

I nodded. I never thought my dad was crazy. Or evil. I didn’t really see him that much, but whenever I did, he always smiled at me and tried to say nice things.

Bennett's dad and Zach's mom were the scary ones.

But my dad went along with this horrible *murder*. It turned out he was just like them after all.

"What do you think our parents are going to make us do now?" I asked. "They made it seem like that was some kind of initiation."

"I don't know," Bennett replied. "But I bet our Families didn't get where they are—become as *powerful* as they are in this City—without doing some bad things."

"I can be bad," Zach mused, staring down at the knife he still held. "If that's what they'll force us to do."

I believed him, but I didn't want that for Zach.

For any of us.

Because I'd figure out how to be bad, too, if it meant protecting Bennett or Zach. If I'd have known we needed to protect Jolie, I'd have stolen a gun and robbed ten banks just so we could have money to run far, far away and never look back.

My chest ached at the thought, and I had to take several huge breaths to stop myself from breaking down again.

"From now on," Bennett said after a long moment. "We trust no one outside of this room. We have each other's backs, always. We do just enough to keep our parents happy until we get access to our trust funds when we graduate from Holywell. And then we decide what we want to do after that."

"Yeah," Zach replied. "If our parents are capable of that, there's no telling what else they would do. It has to be just us. No one else."

"Right," I chimed in. "I thought my dad was nice. But there's no way—he's been *lying* to me my whole life! It's only us from here on out."

"And we make sure nothing like that ever happens again. We lost Jojo, but we won't lose each other," Bennett said, his determination breaking through the sadness in his voice.

I'd finally stopped crying. This was important—we had to figure out how to move on and protect each other.

We fell quiet again, all of us lost in our thoughts, until Zach finally broke the silence.

"I miss her," he rasped.

"Me too," I said softly.

“She’ll always be a part of us,” Bennett added, sniffing slightly before rubbing his sleeve across his eyes. “In our hearts and our memories. No matter what her dad did. *She* was good, and we’ll remember her that way.”

I would hold onto that. Years later, I would even sometimes think it was for the best she’d avoided getting sucked into the underbelly of the Families. She was too good, too happy, too innocent for it all—and in our memories, she could remain that way forever.

But as it turned out, this City had chewed Jolie up and spit her out just as it had the three of us, and she bore the scars of the Families the same as we did.

It was our destiny.

CHAPTER ONE

NOAH - PRESENT DAY



"I just want to say again how thankful the Families are that Miss Knight has been found alive after all of this time. It saddens us all, though, that she has decided to cook up such a strange vendetta against the Families, who mean only to welcome her back with open arms."

The pretty blonde robot, the current favorite from the public relations firm the Families had on retainer, smiled brilliantly for the camera before pasting on her sympathetic face.

"We have launched an investigation into the plane crash that so tragically killed Jeffrey and Kerstin Knight, and we will be cooperating with the Bahamian authorities to determine how Miss Knight was somehow mistakenly declared deceased. The Families have also thoroughly examined the supposed 'evidence' Miss Knight has given to the media regarding her allegations surrounding her parents' deaths and have determined each item to be an extremely well-crafted hoax."

I shifted in my chair, not bothering to look at the press conference as it played on the flat-screen television that hung on the wall of James Spencer's office, instead pretending to be engrossed in my phone. I could feel Zach fidgeting next to me.

"We've requested that Miss Knight submit to a psychological examination, as the Families suspect she may have sustained head

trauma or other lasting injuries in the plane crash that are causing her to invent such outlandish lies about the Families. She has thus far refused, but rest assured we will continue to insist. It is the Families' only desire that she receive the best care available so that she may return to being the happy, healthy former Heir we all once knew her to be."

James turned off the TV and slammed the remote down on the top of his desk. He sent his furious glare around the room, sliding it past where Andrea sat primly next to her bodyguard on the couch and over to where Zach, Bennett, and I were seated in the chairs that faced his desk. As expected, we'd been summoned first thing this morning to face the firing squad.

"I cannot believe that you three were staring that girl in the face for an entire semester and *somehow* did not figure out who she was," he seethed. "Have your heads been entirely up your asses this whole time? This is a goddamn disaster!"

"To be fair, Father," Bennett said, the picture of calm as he'd long ago developed an impenetrable shield when it came to his father's ire. "She was posing as a scholarship student. We rarely had any reason to interact with her or even notice her at all."

What a lie that was, but none of our parents would suspect that. They'd have expected us to keep to ourselves, giving our time and attention only to the caliber of student who merited it. It would have made even less sense to them than it did to us at the time that we—all fucking three of us—had been so interested in Joanna Miller, the brazen, irritating, but also *wildly* alluring, scholarship student from the City's poor Southside.

Well, it all made sense now, didn't it?

"It's unfortunate we aren't able to claim she's an imposter," my dad chimed in from his video feed currently streaming on the second flat-screen TV in James's office. Of course, not even *this* was important enough for him to return to the City. "She had her DNA run by five different independent labs before she came forward. None of the labs are in our network, so we're unable to alter the results. The media knows Jeff's DNA is on file from that bogus paternity suit twenty-five years ago, so she'll be accepted as the real thing."

I glanced his way, knowing he would be able to see the entire room, me included. I hoped he could see the disappointment on my face that he was once again avoiding his problems instead of facing them head-on.

“It is a shame,” Andrea replied coolly, crossing her legs under her tight red skirt and pursing her lips—painted red to match. “If we’d only have known she was crawling around the Academy like a little cockroach, we could have taken care of the problem. No one would’ve missed a mangy street rat from the ghetto.”

Zach, who was dressed in a full suit and tie for our parents, slouched further in his chair. He crossed his arms across his chest and gave his mother a challenging look. No doubt that task would’ve fallen on us—just another *test*—but they were all kidding themselves if they thought Zach, Bennett, or I would ever have harmed a hair on Jolie’s head.

Not after what we went through the first time.

Not that *she* would’ve believed we didn’t have it out for her. Jolie had very clearly decided not to trust us—her closest and best friends for the first eleven years of her life—to protect her. Instead, she chose to lie to us, and now we were on our heels just like our parents were, trying to figure out what to do about this whole fucking mess.

It was a bitter pill for me to swallow.

“Oh, come on, baby,” Andrea cooed at Zach, amused by him as always. “She’s not your childhood friend anymore. She’s a crass little slut who now absolutely *reeks* of the Southside.”

Bennett cut in before Zach could mouth off. “So, there won’t be a kill order on her?” His blasé tone was a work of art.

“No, unfortunately,” James spat. “Not for the time being. It appears that once she was finished sneaking around, *stealing* from us, she knew it’d be much harder for us to kill her if she came forward. Like Andrea said, no one would’ve missed some random bitch from the slums, but if she disappears now, the Families look guilty.”

We *were* guilty. And so far, the City appeared divided as to whom they believed.

“James, we will handle this just as we handle everything,” my dad said, not even looking at the camera anymore while he was obviously fiddling with something on his computer. His graying blond hair was swept artfully behind his ears, and he had a hell of a tan for the middle of December. I wondered which of his beach properties he was visiting and which of his mistresses he had with him. “We have everything. She has nothing. It’s her word against ours.”

“I have already lost one major deal with an overseas investor!” James barked, banging his fist on his desk. “They didn’t want to contend with even the *potential* of bad PR by associating with Spencer, so they pulled out at the eleventh goddamn hour. This cannot continue.”

“She doesn’t exactly have *nothing*,” Andrea added. “We know that the minute she stepped out of that *disaster* of a party last night, she initiated the process to have her inheritance returned to her from the Knight Foundation.”

James looked at me. “And what does that entail?”

I cleared my throat. I was knowledgeable on this particular point because I was on the foundation’s board. “All of Mr. and Mrs. Knight’s personal assets at the time of their death, as well as Jolie’s trust fund, were used to fund the foundation as directed by their wills. The entire amount would have gone to Jolie as their surviving Heir. The foundation also owns the Knight penthouse, which as you know is currently leased to Anders.”

Jolie was a billionaire now. But she only had money—Spencer, Hargraves, and Ferrero had descended like vultures on the Knight empire before her parents’ bodies were even cold, and we now owned all of Jeffrey Knight’s shares in the various business enterprises that had made up the *very* profitable Knight portfolio.

James was thoughtful—his anger finally receding—as he leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “Despite that, Peter makes an excellent point. We are the Families, for fuck’s sake. She is an orphan—now a rich one—but that doesn’t change the fact that she spent her formative years attending shitty schools on the Southside and being raised by outsiders. She’s an Heir in name only, and she is an Heir to *nothing*. The Knight empire is ours and will continue to be ours. She has nothing behind her but her money, her ex-Special

Forces adoptive father who taught her how to use a parachute, and her adoptive brother who is decent with a computer. It won't be long before the entire City realizes she's not to be taken seriously."

Bennett continued to stare emotionlessly at his father while Zach and I just nodded like this made complete sense to us.

None of us—not even Bennett—were going to tell our parents that we suspected Jolie had a lot more than just her new family behind her. We had started to speculate she was hiding something even when we thought she was just Joanna Miller. In addition to our growing concern that one of our *peers* would finally do something to her that would actually kill her, the fact that we'd found her to be increasingly more shady had caused us to distance ourselves and push even harder for her to leave school.

And now that we knew who she actually was?

She wasn't an idiot. One did not just publicly declare war on the Families for shits and giggles, but it was still so *unbelievably* reckless, even if she had some kind of help.

"Exactly," Andrea said, beaming her vicious white smile at James before looking at us. "This can be stamped out at Holywell. The students will see how this girl, who well and truly *is* from the Southside, can never compete with the *real* Heirs. Her illegitimacy will trickle up from the students to their parents, and she'll be dismissed along with all of her wild stories about us."

The three of us just nodded. Of course it would be left to us to deal with *their* mess, as usual.

"I'll set up some meetings with my larger investors and partners," my dad added. "We'll just need to reassure the big players so that they don't get skittish. All will be fine."

"Bennett, I'll be moving things forward with the Jansens," James added offhandedly, like that arrangement wasn't a *giant* fucking deal for Bennett. "Not that I'm worried they'd turn on us, but sealing the deal will lock them in. We can't afford to lose the partnership of the largest hedge fund in the City."

Bennett gave his father a perfunctory nod, but the slight tensing of his jaw and flare of his nostrils didn't get past me. His imminent engagement wasn't exactly thrilling him.

“Alright, meeting adjourned,” James said with a lazy wave of his hand. “We’ll keep each other apprised of any developments in this fiasco. And you three—” He glared at us as we stood up from our chairs. “—had better fucking fix this. It is *your* ineptitude that put us here.”

Zach smirked, but his dark eyes were hard. “I think it was the *murders* you three committed that put us here. But don’t worry—your clean-up crew is on it.”

Andrea huffed, rolling her eyes. “Zachary, quit that.”

“Out!” James barked, pointing at the door.

We strolled out without another word.

CHAPTER TWO

ZACH



I threw myself onto the giant leather couch in the Hargraves penthouse living room, having already shucked my suit jacket and loosened my tie. We'd piled into Noah's *precious* electric car and driven straight here because Noah's was the Family home in which we were least likely to run into any of our parents.

"Fuck, that was annoying," I said as I stretched. "Shocker that we're being blamed for this."

Noah flopped down next to me while Bennett grabbed the recliner.

"I didn't sleep at all last night," Noah griped, hanging his head in his hands. "Did you guys?"

"Fuck no," I replied.

"No, I didn't," Bennett said, jerking his tie off with an angry pull. "I still just… cannot fucking believe this."

"Yeah," I said with a big grin. "Jojo's back, and she's a fucking wet dream. I can't wait until the semester starts so we can make her our girl."

They both stared at me like I was nuts.

I was not nuts. This was the *only* way it could be, and they needed to get on board.

"Are you out of your mind?" Bennett finally sputtered. "She is here to *destroy* us."

“I know,” I said, my smile only getting bigger. “It’s so hot.”

“Zach,” Noah chided in his patronizing-teacher voice. “She doesn’t feel that way about us. I’m not sure she feels *anything* for us anymore. She showed up to campus, lied to our faces, and *stole* from us.”

I waved a dismissive hand at him. “I’d be pretty pissed too if I were her. Weren’t you listening? She heard *everything*.”

Noah winced, and even Bennett looked depressed.

“*We* didn’t kill her parents,” Noah pointed out in a hushed, sad voice.

“And yet she’s deceived us and declared war,” Bennett added. “Anything you thought you felt for her as Joanna Miller was a lie, Zach.”

I arched a brow at him. “Anything all *three* of us felt for Joanna Miller was *because* she’s Jolie Knight, you dumbasses.”

I’d tumbled through many stages of grief during the five minutes that our world had been turned upside down at the Holiday Ball. Shock, denial, anger, profound sadness, and so on, but after we’d watched our Jojo waltz out of that hall looking like sex on a stick and an avenging angel all at once, I’d landed on the only thing I knew I could possibly feel about having her back with us.

Pure, unadulterated joy.

The fact that she was now a tall, smart-mouthed, gorgeous goddess was icing on the cake. She was our fourth, our missing piece, and she belonged with us.

Fuck literally anything and everything else.

“You’re insane,” Bennett said, exasperated—his usual mode these days. I was adept at ignoring it, and I also did not miss that he failed to deny the fact that he had some kind of feelings for our feisty princess from the Southside. “She’ll lure you in and then gut you, Zach. You can’t trust her—she isn’t the same girl we knew.”

I rolled my eyes. “We’re not the same boys she knew, either. The Families have done a number on us *all*, Bennett.”

“Are we at least in agreement that our parents are underestimating her?” Noah asked, bouncing his foot restlessly where it was crossed elegantly over his knee. “She may not have an

empire under her, but she managed to get in and out of three of the most secure places in the entire City, completely undetected."

"Agreed," Bennett replied. "But she's still no match for the might of the Families, especially now that we know she's coming."

"We have to convince her to abandon this crusade," Noah added. "I won't watch her get herself killed. Not again. She should take her money and run."

She probably should, but I was selfish—I wanted to keep her.

"We can protect her," I said with confidence. "Remember our oath, Bennett? We look out for each other—no one else matters. She was the *reason* for that oath, and she's one of us."

"How do you suggest we do that while she's also actively trying to bring down the Families?" Bennett retorted.

"Not to mention our parents would lose it if they thought we were playing too nice with her," Noah added.

Our parents lost it about a lot of things, and I was finished caring. My mom only played at being a loving parent, and I'd stopped giving a shit about Ferrero a long time ago. I'd been in survival mode, taking it day by day, but now I had something I *wanted*.

My brothers and I would get our Jojo back, and we'd be whole again.

"Both of you need to grow some balls," I growled. "This is our *girl* we're talking about. After everything she endured last semester, or, fuck, the last seven years? Her balls are bigger than all of ours put together. Sack up, or she won't want us."

I looked between the two of them, hoping they understood how serious I was. Noah had stalled in the sadness phase of grief and would need a little time, while Bennett was likely going to be stuck in the angry phase until he pulled his head out of his ass.

Fine. I'd wait, and I hoped Jojo would do the same.

They exchanged a look that definitely said, "Let's change the subject so he'll lay off," before Noah sighed, saying, "School is going to be… interesting."

Bennett scoffed. "The shitshow that was last semester was a cakewalk compared to what this will be."

I could only laugh, my maniacal grin returning. It had been so extremely entertaining to observe as our fellow classmates finally

caught on to who was speaking to them at the Holiday Ball. Watching as each of them comprehended that the girl they'd been calling "slum trash" for an entire semester was actually a motherfucking *Heir* of the Four Families had been like watching a car crash in slow motion.

Bennett's future fiancée had looked as though she'd bitten into something *very* sour. That was going to be an interesting dynamic and not at all fun for Bennett to navigate.

I only felt a little bit sorry for him. It was time for him to tell his father to fuck all the way off, even if we didn't have access to our trust funds yet. I was so tired of watching him try to please that man.

"Oh, good morning, sirs," Gifford Buckley, Noah's sniveling family butler, said as he bustled into the room. "Can I, um… offer you some late breakfast? Perhaps a drink to take the edge off?"

The staff would be abuzz with the news of the return of the dead Knight Heir, the gossip always managing to spread like wildfire between those who were closest to the Families.

"No, thank you, Buckley," Noah replied with his polite smile. Buckley was a nosy ass-kisser and a tattletale who annoyed the shit out of Noah, but he'd had him handled for several years now. "Any news on when my father may return?"

"Oh, uh… none, sir," he replied. "He checked in as usual this morning but did not inform me of plans to return. Your mother has also sent word she will not be coming home for the holidays."

"I see," Noah replied, nonplussed. Noah's mom had bailed when he was ten years old and rarely showed her face in the City anymore. She was married to Noah's dad on paper only, and Noah had stopped letting it bother him years ago. "You're dismissed, thank you, Buckley."

He scampered out of the room like the weasel he was.

A moment later, my phone buzzed in my pocket.

"Fuck," I swore, seeing the text from my mother. "Mom wants to meet with me in an hour."

"I'm sure my father will want the same," Bennett muttered, now slouched in his chair and staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the dark waters of the Obsidian River glittering like black diamonds in the midmorning sun. "Just to drive it all home one more time."

I stood up, texting my team to schedule a car back to Ferrero Tower because God forbid an Heir walk four blocks out in the open.

I looked down at the morose fuckers who were my best friends, my brothers, the people I considered my *real* family, and I knew we were going to make it through this just like we always did.

“Buck up, team,” I said. “We’ll figure out how to handle everything. We’re the fucking Heirs.”

And our Jojo was *alive.*

Their resolve seemed to harden, at least a little, and I knew my work here was done.

For now.



“Zachary, baby, I’m concerned that you are not taking this little hiccup seriously enough.”

My mom sat behind the ornate golden desk in her home office located on the main floor of our penthouse and just off our large, sparkling white kitchen that she’d never set foot in, to my knowledge. She had her makeup mirror out and was reapplying her blood-red lipstick before she was off to the Club to lure her next victim into whatever scheme was her current focus.

Ramon, her long-time bodyguard and sometimes fuck-buddy, stood at the door and watched her with his usual intensity, while Frankie lounged against the wall of the office, playing some mindless game on his phone and half listening to her pouting.

I gave her my most charming smile. “Mom, do I ever take anything that seriously?”

She let out a tinkling little laugh, like I was just so precious. It was a game we played. She fawned over me, I charmed her, and we danced around each other like this until I did something to really disappoint her.

She used to toss me to Ramon or the Enforcers to be *taught a lesson* so that she could continue to pretend to be my sweet, caring mother.

Until I started to fight back. I made sure I became the most dangerous of them all.

So, now we were in a stalemate of sorts. I was usually a good little soldier, cleaning up the Family's messes when I felt like it.

I didn't feel like it at this particular moment.

"It's just very important that the City sees that girl as an unhinged pretender, certainly unqualified to hold the title of an Heir," Mom went on, now dabbing powder on her cheeks. "Of course, if she wants to pick a fight with the Families, we'll crush her like the annoying little bug she is. But all of this bad publicity is very annoying, baby."

"I'm sure it is, Mom," I replied lazily. "But we have people for that."

She eyed me now, finally tearing her dark eyes away from her reflection. "You just need to remember she's not your friend anymore, sweetie. I would very much appreciate it if you didn't defy me on this."

"Oh, Mom," I said, returning her sharklike grin. "I wouldn't dream of it."

She narrowed her eyes at me, still holding onto her smile until her glare swung to an oblivious Frankie, and that smile slid right off of her face.

"I needn't remind you, little brother," she hissed. "That this is *your* fuckup. If you'd have just put a bullet in that little bitch before she jumped off of the roof of Spencer Tower, *none* of this would be happening."

Frankie glanced up at her, unperturbed. "My deepest apologies, Andrea. Shall I present myself for a lashing? Ten ought to do it, don't you think?"

"You are not funny, you psychopathic little shit," she barked. "You think I can't take the Ferrero name away just as easily as I gave it to you? You have a place in this Family so long as you remain *useful* to me. And letting a dead girl smear our good name through the mud is *Not. Fucking. Useful*."

He only grinned at her. He was used to her attitude with him, the annoying little bastard half brother who was dumped on her years ago, but I hated it. Frankie bled for this Family just as I did, and he deserved better, even if he was a little… off.

“I think failing to kill that girl in the first place was the fuckup, dear sister,” he replied. “The almighty heads of the Families couldn’t even shoot a defenseless little girl! How unfortunate.”

She slammed her mirror down onto the desk, and the resulting crack echoed across the vaulted ceilings of her study.

“Out! Both of you,” she commanded, then she paused with a tight smile sent back in my direction. “Zachary, handle this at the Academy for me, please?”

“Of course, Mom,” I said with a shitty little wave, and then I followed Frankie out the door.

I made my way to the stairs, intending to grab a bag of clothes from my bedroom before returning to Noah’s for the duration of the break, when Frankie fell into step beside me.

“You’re welcome for the little gift I sent you,” he practically sang at me.

“What do you mean?” I replied, only half-paying attention to him as I climbed the stairs, and he followed.

“Your girl. I let her jump off that roof.”

I came to an abrupt halt on the second-floor landing, whirling around to grab him by the collar of his ratty T-shirt, and I shoved him into a corner of the dim hallway.

He smirked at me, not bothered at all by my manhandling him.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I’d pulled her pack off of her in the scuffle, so she was trapped on that roof,” he said, his smirk turning manic. “I had her cornered, and when I pulled her mask down, I recognized her instantly. I can’t believe you idiots hadn’t.”

“You’re shitting me, man,” I said, shaking my head. “You haven’t seen her since she was like, eight or nine years old.”

“Fine, I cheated,” he replied, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “I heard her partner call her *Jojo*. And given the situation we were in, it just sparked my curiosity. And when you’re looking at her face with *that* in mind, it’s pretty fucking obvious.”

I sighed. It made sense. Our sweet Jojo was dead—why would we ever have thought the brash, insolent, *delicious* scholarship student from Southside could be her?

“And you… let her go?” I asked quietly.

“I couldn’t let an opportunity for such *fireworks* pass us by.”

Frankie did love chaos, thank fuck. I owed him.

“Plus,” he added, patting me on the chest. “I knew you’d want her back. Just looking out for my nephew.”

And sticking it to my mom.

“I… yeah. It was the right call, dude,” I said, then I fixed him with a stern glare. “But a heads-up would’ve been nice.”

He just chuckled. “Where’s the fun in that? Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a date with a few unfortunate souls who owe Andrea a lot of money.”

He pushed away from where I had him trapped against the wall and sauntered off down the stairs.

This entire situation just kept getting wilder, and I, for one, was looking forward to riding the rollercoaster.

CHAPTER THREE

BENNETT



For the duration of the Academy's month-long winter break, the three of us laid low at Noah's penthouse, leaving only to stay at Zach's for one weekend when Noah's father had briefly returned to the City.

Avoiding our parents had become almost second nature to us after all this time. As long as we answered their calls and appeared when summoned to take orders, they generally didn't seem to care that we rarely crossed paths.

I did go home occasionally to make sure my mother was still alive, but I tried very hard to do so only when I knew my father was out.

As expected, he had demanded a private meeting with me shortly after the three of us had been yelled at as a group, and he'd told me in no uncertain terms that I was a failure, a pathetic excuse for a son and Heir, and that he expected me to take care of this *problem* before it got any further out of hand.

I'd only stared at him, letting his insults and rage slide right off my back while I hoped I looked serious instead of bored and annoyed.

All the while, *she* was on my mind.

Our best friend, the girl we had mourned for seven long brutal years, had returned to our lives, bamboozled us into thinking she was a nobody—a mouthy troublemaker, forbidden fruit dangled in

front of us day after fucking day—and all the while, she'd been plotting against us like *we* were her enemies.

She had Zach living in fantasyland.

She'd broken Noah's heart.

And she'd thrown down the gauntlet, and I was going to have to be the one to stand against her.

I hated everything about all of it.

Except for the fact that she was alive. Knowing that she'd somehow managed to avoid the cruel fate our parents had orchestrated for her, then swam across the fucking river and *thrived*? It had lifted the crushing weight of the grief I'd been carrying around over losing her all these years.

I felt… lighter, somehow.

But I was also pretty fucking angry. Instead of running back into our arms, she'd declared war against us.

"They haven't picked up anything from her except that she's communicated with the head of the Knight Foundation several times through her lawyer," Noah was saying as he bent over his laptop at the large dining room table that separated his Family's kitchen from the living room. "She's only taken half of the Foundation's funds so far, leaving the rest so that it can continue to support the charitable causes her parents outlined in their estate plan."

"How noble," I muttered, scrolling through the front page of *The City Tribune* on my phone.

"She's still richer than any of us schmucks," Zach chimed in from behind the stove, where he was wearing nothing but his boxers and an apron while he futzed over his omelet like an asshole. "Without our trust funds, we're still just leashed dogs."

Despite Zach's insistence that we should just show up to Jolie's house with flowers and a fucking box of chocolates and demand she speak to us, we'd decided to keep our distance over the break, watching over things from Noah's tower.

We weren't watching Jolie so much as we were watching our parents watch her through their respective teams of investigators, hackers, and informants. She'd spent her break in Olde Town with her adoptive family—including her *cousin* who was definitely not her

cousin—except when she'd visited Mari in the City for a single weekend.

"She hasn't contacted Anders either," Noah added. "Except the Foundation's told him she doesn't want to kick him out of the Knight penthouse just yet, since she'll be living at the Academy."

"I'm sure she suspects Anders still hasn't found his way out of Bennett's dad's ass," Zach replied with a snort. "He's probably taken to his bed over the shock of it all."

I really didn't know why my father bothered with Anders. He was useless, and it was no secret that Knight belonged to the other three Families now. Keeping Jolie's weak-willed uncle as the "Acting Head of Knight" was a farce, and everyone knew it.

My phone dinged with another news alert, and I pulled up the landing page for *The Saint Gabriel Herald*. "The majority of the City media is still either discussing the Knight Heir's reappearance in very vague terms, or they're running our PR team's version of the story," I said.

"But the videos of her speech from the Holiday Ball keep popping up on national sites and gossip blogs that aren't owned or controlled by the Families," Noah added, fingers still clicking away on his keyboard. "Every time the Families' team gets them taken down, someone else puts them back up. It's like Whack-A-Mole out there."

As far as we could surmise, Jolie hadn't done anything beyond tossing the bomb that was the *truth* out into the world along with the damning evidence she'd managed to steal, and now we were just watching as its blast slowly chipped away at the shiny visage of the Four Families. A few more large pending deals had fallen apart for both Spencer and Hargraves, and Ferrero had lost one of its biggest investors in its casino business just last week—the lingering stench of murder accusations apparently unpalatable to certain people. Stock prices were tanking.

It would die down eventually. The Families held this City in a chokehold, and as long as the rich stayed rich, they'd continue to look the other way.

Zach dropped into the chair next to Noah at the table, his breakfast in hand, and I joined them after making myself an espresso. I had a simple white T-shirt on—something I'd only wear in

the privacy of our home—and flannel pajama pants. With his sweatpants, Noah wore a fitted Holywell Crew shirt I'd given him last year, while Zach wore just his apron and a smirk.

"How much do you guys think Hendrickson's balls have shriveled since he found out he'd been fucking with an actual Heir?" Zach asked casually as he shoveled eggs into his mouth.

"If he has balls at all by the end of the semester, it will be a miracle," Noah muttered.

I shook my head. "She was so fucking reckless as Joanna. It'll be so much worse now."

Zach punched me in the shoulder much harder than necessary. "Have some faith in our girl, man. She's all street smart and shit now."

"Exactly," I replied. "She doesn't know how to play in *our* world, Zach. And not to mention, we can't appear to be doing anything except making sure she fails."

Noah just stared into his coffee cup, a frown on his face and his blue eyes misting behind his glasses. "She could've just come to us. She doesn't have to be doing *any* of this."

My heart ached for him—for that little kid who cried himself to sleep every night for months.

And he was right—she could have, and she didn't.

After a few moments of tense silence, Buckley appeared out of the hallway that led to the foyer. Instead of simpering at Noah like usual, he looked at me.

"Miss Proctor is here to see you, Mr. Spencer," he announced. "The concierge just rang me."

Shit. There was only one person I hated dealing with almost as much as my father, and it was his private secretary.

Elise Proctor.

She was only thirty-two, had been my father's private secretary since she was twenty-four, and was almost certainly fucking him. She thought she *was* Spencer, and the fact that he'd sent her to hunt me down at Noah's house did not bode well for me.

"Fuck, he sent the Wicked Witch of the West over here?" Zach griped, sagging back in his chair. "I swear to God, if she hits on you in front of me, I am going to throw her into Noah's pool."

And there was also that.

“Send her up,” I grunted at Buckley because there was no refusing to see her without starting a fight with my father I didn’t care to have.

“Yes, sir.”

As he retreated, Noah blew out a breath. “We were so close. Almost made it to the end of the break unmolested.”

A minute later, the loud ding of the elevator arriving at the penthouse sounded, followed by the click-clacking of high heels on the marble-tiled floors.

“The sirs are in the kitchen, miss,” Buckley’s nasally voice sounded out in the foyer, followed by a tight, feminine, “Thank you,” before the clicking resumed.

Elise marched into Noah’s kitchen like she owned it, her large designer bag thrown over one shoulder and a file folder clutched in her pink-clawed hand.

She wore her usual tight black pencil skirt and silky blouse, unbuttoned just low enough to tease a peek at her artificial tits that had appeared sometime during year three of her tenure with Spencer. Her patent-leather heels were a few inches too high to be considered office attire, and her dark-brown hair was pulled into its usual severe ponytail. She wore red-framed glasses that Noah had determined she did not have a prescription for, so we surmised my father had some kind of sexy-librarian kink she’d decided to play to.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” she cooed as she dropped her bag unceremoniously on Noah’s dining room table. “I apologize for interrupting your breakfast, but Mr. Spencer is trying to get this little matter wrapped up today.”

She strutted over to where I sat at the head of the table, spreading the contents of the folder out in front of me as she leaned in, her tits inches from my face.

“If you’ll just sign at the bottom here, sweetie,” she said, her voice low next to my ear. “We’ll get you engaged. Your father has directed me to pick out the ring, so I presume that’s acceptable to you?”

Fuck. I’d been hoping for more time before having to deal with this, but my father was clearly more spooked by Jolie’s reappearance than he claimed to be. I didn’t think the Jansens were

in danger of going anywhere, even if there had been irrefutable video evidence of my father actually shooting Jeffrey Knight in the head, but he clearly thought this was an easy way to lock them—and their dollars—in with certainty.

No matter that it was *my* life he was signing away.

"Don't do it, man," Zach muttered from across the table. "Tell your dad to fuck off."

Elise gasped like she was scandalized by Zach's attitude despite having been subjected to it for years. "Mr. Ferrero! Bennett will do no such thing. He knows how important this is to the Family."

I knew how important it was for my father to continue to treat me like I was too young, too inexperienced, and too clueless to make big decisions for myself and for Spencer.

I hated the bastard, but I also, inexplicably, still wanted his fucking respect.

I wanted to do right by Spencer.

"Here," I said, scrawling my signature along the bottom of the contract—but not before I wrote in one important caveat. "Tell my father these are my terms. Purchase the ring and have it couriered to Harper along with the contract for her signature."

She leaned in further, pushing her glasses down her nose as if she needed them to read what I'd written there. "*The Engagement Period shall last the duration of the Parties' tenure at Holywell Academy, with the wedding not to take place prior to the Parties' date of graduation*," she read aloud before turning to scowl at me. "Your father will not be pleased you altered the contract."

"He'll respect my ability to negotiate," I replied coolly. "I suggest you take this straight to the Jansens before I change my mind, Elise, or else Father will be even more displeased."

"Can't have that," Noah added absently, pretending to be engrossed in his laptop.

She finally pulled her breasts out of my face and stood up, pursing her bright red lips. "I see. Well, I will be on my way then." She closed the folder and slid it gingerly into her bag before turning back to give me a sultry smile. "You are getting good at this, Bennett. Soon you'll be ruling the Family, and I'll be there to… see to your needs."

Before Zach could make good on his earlier threats, she turned on her heel and left the room, her hips swaying as she went.

Zach watched her leave, his nose wrinkling in disgust, before he turned to glare at me. “You’re really going to marry Harper Jansen? I know you’ve always thought of this as just a business transaction and that those Tier One bitches are basically interchangeable, but Harper almost *killed* Jojo, man. If you hadn’t run out there to look for her after Harper gloated about it, our girl could be dead.”

“She’s not our girl,” I retorted automatically before I responded to his initial question. “And… I don’t know.”

I’d wanted to wring Harper’s neck when I’d heard her bragging about abandoning Joanna Miller in the middle of the fucking river, and I hadn’t even known who she actually was then—another testament to the frustrating and confusing pull Joanna Miller had on me last semester. To say I wasn’t thrilled to be engaged to Harper was a gross understatement, but I didn’t exactly have a choice at the moment.

We had a lot of problems to deal with, and this was a minor one that I’d just managed to kick two and a half years down the road.

We would be driving our cars back to Holywell tonight, and classes resumed tomorrow.

We would see *her* tomorrow.

And it would begin.

CHAPTER FOUR

ZACH



On Monday morning, we entered the dining hall to the usual fanfare. Bennett threw the doors open with a little more force than was really necessary, his “don’t fuck with me” face firmly in place, and the crowd parted like the Red Sea as Noah and I followed in his wake down the center aisle to our usual table.

As we sat, the noise of the room increased again, the nervous energy of the student body palpable.

“The usual this morning, sirs?” the dining manager said as he appeared next to our table, dressed in his chef’s apron emblazoned with the Holywell crest, and he gave each of us a sniveling smile.

“Please,” Bennett replied without glancing in his direction.

None of us were fans of this particular setup—the raised private table, being waited on when everyone else stood in a buffet line—but when we’d resisted it on our first day at the Academy, the dining manager had tattled to the dean, who’d tattled to Bennett’s father, and that was that.

We were the *Heirs*, above all others, and we were to act like it.

I flopped back in my chair, loosening my already loose tie and rolling my shirtsleeves to my elbows. “The sheep are restless,” I said with a chuckle, nodding down to the front two tables where the highest-tier students sat. “They’ll be hoping we protect them from our Princess’s wrath.”

Noah forced a smile at Annie Ling, who had a huge lady boner for him—as many girls did. She waved and smiled at him from the table below, the desperation even clearer on her face than usual.

Maybe she was a tad worried what Noah thought of her after she'd been involved in a plot to throw his old best friend and fellow Heir to a sexual predator? Time would tell.

"They'll be looking to us to determine how to act about all of this," Noah replied, sighing. "I hate how blindsided I still feel."

Bennett sat at the head of the small table today, giving the room a solid view of his profile and the hard set of his jaw. Harper had just swanned into the room, conspicuously waving around the giant rock that now adorned her ring finger, and I watched as her peers shrieked with pretend delight and fawned over her.

Bennett ignored it all, choosing instead to sit and brood. "Whatever we do," he told us, "we need to be thinking with our heads. Not our hearts." He glanced at Noah. "Or our dicks." Now a disapproving look at me.

He received my middle finger in return. All of my body parts were in fine working order, thank you, and they were in agreement.

Jojo was our missing piece and would be *ours*—in every way imaginable.

We'd figure out the rest of this mess after that.

The sound of the doors flying open again pulled our attention to the hall's entrance, and the room fell silent as Jolie appeared in the doorway.

The three of us watched as wordlessly as the rest of the crowd as our girl marched down the aisle, headed straight for us. My heart thumped in my chest, anticipation and excitement thrumming in my body at her approach.

She still looked like the Princess the three of us had grown to know and begrudgingly obsess over last semester, but she was now also so much our Jojo that it was almost physically painful to look at her.

Her white-blonde hair was pulled into a high ponytail, and she wore a loose sweater and tight black pants. But it wasn't lost on me, nor would it be on Noah and Bennett, that her clothes were now expensive, high-quality pieces. Her pants were real leather, fitting

her tight body like a glove, and her white sweater looked like cashmere. And to top it all off, instead of her old, ratty shoes, she wore shiny black high-heeled boots, making her legs look miles longer than they already were.

Our Jojo had grown up to be so fucking sexy. The hard-on I'd had for Joanna Miller last semester had only increased tenfold now that I knew who she really was, and my dick stirred under the table as she neared.

"She's coming up here," Noah murmured, sounding just as enraptured as I was.

Bennett said nothing, but he watched her approach our table with the same intensity that he always had back when he thought no one noticed how consumed he'd become by the Southside Princess.

I couldn't smother my wide grin as she climbed the short steps up to our table, looking each of us in the face with those gorgeous aquamarine eyes. It made my chest ache to see them again after all these years. She dropped into the chair at the other end of the table with all the grace and poise of royalty, putting her directly across from Bennett—who was smoldering at her—with Noah and me in the middle, facing the crowd.

If we'd had any lingering doubts about her being exactly who she said she was, the cherry blossom charm on the necklace that hung between her perky tits would have assuaged them. I distinctly remembered when her dad had given it to her as a late birthday gift not long before she "died." She'd hardly ever taken it off.

"Gentlemen," she said lightly as she gave Bennett a big, taunting smile. "Thanks for saving my seat for me."

The entire room watched us, the gasps and whispers just audible from where we sat.

"Jojo," I said in greeting, since the other two could only manage to stare at her. "Welcome back, baby girl. We… we missed you."

My voice hitched on my last words, and I smothered it with a cough. I was going to bring her back into the fold, regardless of all the bullshit, but it didn't erase the seven years we'd had to spend without her.

It'd hurt like a bitch.

“Did you?” she asked, looking around the table. “Seems to me like you all have *flourished* since your Families stole the Knight empire.”

“Yes, we fucking missed you,” Noah spat in a harsh whisper. “We have mourned you, cried for you, felt your absence so keenly it was fucking *unbearable*, but it seems you did not feel the same for us. You have been not only alive but *in the City* this entire time, and you didn’t once try to let us know you were okay. Not. Fucking. Once.”

Okay, so we were just going to get it *all* out there right away.

Her shrewd gaze snapped to Noah, his usual affable smile nowhere to be seen as his sad, dark-blue eyes bored into her from behind his glasses. My buddy was hurting—we all were—but he was taking her years of silence the hardest.

“Oh, my bad, Noah,” she hissed. “My bad for not just hopping onto Instagram to shoot you a DM to check in after your parents tried to have me *murdered*. I spent the entire first year I was hiding on the Southside looking over my shoulder, jumping at every fucking shadow, having no goddamn idea whether the Families even believed I was dead. There was no way I could risk contacting you.”

“Even if it were true that you had no safe way to contact us over the past *seven* years,” Noah went on, “which I doubt, given the capabilities you’ve clearly shown you have, you did not have to show up to this Academy and *lie to our faces* about who you are.” He banged his fist on the table in anger, and heads jerked in our direction again. “Why, Jolie? Did our years of friendship mean nothing to you? Did you really think we’d have endangered you by running off to tell our parents you were alive?”

She glared at him. “How would I fucking know, Noah? You’re the Heirs, and you’ve spent the seven years since that night being indoctrinated into the Families. And your behavior last semester wasn’t particularly *inspiring*, was it?” She arched a blonde brow as she swept those eyes across the three of us who were now paying for our callous asshole act. “You need to understand—I would not risk my plans to avenge my parents for *anything*.”

“We get it, Princess,” I said smoothly, trying to dial the tension down a notch. “Obviously we’re all still… processing this. But you need to know that none of us would *ever* wish you harm. We didn’t

when we thought you were Joanna, as much as I know you won't believe that, and we certainly don't now that we know you're our Jojo."

She turned those skeptical eyes on me. I realized as I studied her face that she'd worn makeup last semester to hide the freckles that danced across her nose and cheeks.

I never could've forgotten those.

"Yeah, Zach? I can't imagine my mother's murderer wants me walking this earth much longer. When Mommy says jump, you don't say, 'how high?'"

Low blow. "Why don't you try getting to know me before you judge me, Princess?" I growled.

Bennett cleared his throat. I doubted his green-eyed stare had left Jolie's face even once since she sat down. He rumbled, "You not only came here and lied to us, Jolie, you also *stole* from us."

She looked at him, not rattled by his intensity in the slightest, and she gave him a smug smile. "I did."

"That was why you came to Holywell? To get closer to us so you could steal from us?"

"Yes."

While we were on the subject….

"How'd you get my key to the Club's basement?" I asked her. "It never went missing."

She glanced at me, still amused. "Max took a mold of your key while we were dancing at The Revelry."

That fucker. He and I were going to have some *words*.

Noah had relaxed—marginally—and he now studied her intently. "You had to have taken the codes to Hargraves straight from my laptop. Was it when we met in my office?"

"It was."

Noah frowned. "Did you set off the alarm on our dorm condo?"

She just smiled at him.

"Shit."

Bennett had leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his suited chest as he glared at her. "And you stole my key fob when—"

"You pulled me out of a panic attack by making me come all over your fingers? Yeah, I did."

My eyebrows hit my hairline, as did Noah's, and we both shifted in our chairs to swing our accusing stares over to Bennett, inviting him to explain *that* little detail he'd omitted from his story of saving Jojo from the river.

I couldn't believe he'd had a taste of the Princess and didn't even fucking tell us.

That hypocritical *dick*.

He just continued to glower at her, ignoring us while also not denying it. "You are going to get yourself killed if you keep on with this vendetta."

"I'll be fine. Thank you for your concern, though, Bennett," she sniped back.

"Really, Jolie, you have to stop this—" Noah began, but he snapped his mouth shut when it was clear we were about to be interrupted.

Harper had flounced up to our table, her short tartan skirt swishing against her legs as she approached Bennett, who of course still had not torn his eyes away from Jojo.

"Hey, baby," she purred, flashing her engagement ring in Jolie's direction and not even attempting to fake subtlety. "I just wanted to tell you I was so thrilled to receive your *proposal*. And this ring is gorgeous!"

Bennett finally peeled his eyes off of Jolie, giving Harper a cool look before he said, "You're welcome. As you're aware, my father has decided it would be best to accelerate the timeline."

"You can thank me for that, Jansen," Jojo added, her tone flippant, but I hadn't missed her narrowing those dangerous eyes at Harper's ring before she wiped her face free of emotion. "I may have inconveniently exposed James Spencer for the murderer he is, so Spencer's just trying to make sure Daddy's dollars don't stray from the Family empire. You sure you want to hitch your wagon to that?"

I snickered. "You're vicious, Princess."

Harper had bent over the table to make eyes at Bennett, but now she stood up to glare at Jojo. "No one believes your crazy lies. Just because you have a Family name doesn't make you an Heir—not with all the time you spent in the slums. You shouldn't even be at this table."

“Oh?” Jojo put on a puzzled face, and it was fucking cute. “Where should I be then? If you want to check the details, Harper, I’ve got more money to *my* name now than anyone sitting at this table, or in this room, actually.”

Harper’s jaw dropped a minuscule amount before she popped it shut and stuck her nose in the air. “That doesn’t make you a real *Heir*. Keep running your mouth about the Families and see what happens.”

Jojo grinned. “I plan to.”

“Ugh,” Harper spat, rolling her eyes and turning back to Bennett to give him a sympathetic little pout. “I don’t know how you tolerate her, baby. Come see me whenever you need a break.”

She shot him a seductive grin before she trotted off.

“Congratulations, Bennett,” Jolie said, forcing a smile. “I suppose your choosing a murderous bitch for a bride makes some kind of sense—that does tend to run in your Family.”

“Jolie…,” Noah cautioned her at the same time that I rumbled, “Princess…,” but it was no use because Bennett decided he’d just fuck things up right out of the gate.

“Your anger at the Families is misplaced,” he said, his voice low and threaded with warning. “Stop this war you think you’re waging against us. Whatever your father did to break the oath of loyalty between the Four Families is what killed your parents. The three of us are really, *really* fucking glad you’re alive, but you won’t stay that way if you keep this up. Take your money and go live your fucking life, Jolie.”

Her face flushed, and she jerked to her feet. She slammed her palms on the table, leaning in to look Bennett right in his eyes.

“Don’t tell me you believe the *bullshit* your dad has peddled as an excuse to murder my family?” she seethed. “I bet he’s never given you a goddamn *sliver* of a detail about what my dad supposedly did to make him and his entire family deserving of being pulled from their beds and *executed*.”

She was right. He hadn’t. But we’d had to hold onto something all these years—some *valid* reason, however tenuous, that she wasn’t with us anymore.

Something to cling to that would mean our parents weren't as big of monsters as they seemed.

Something that said the institution of the Four Families wasn't a total crock of shit.

She looked around the table, her hard stare running across each of us, and she shook her head. "I guess it was too much to hope that maybe you three hadn't been brainwashed after all." She scoffed, returning her angry glare to Bennett. "And fuck *you*, Bennett. I'll never stop until I know the truth."

Then she shoved her chair away, throwing her simple black backpack—the same one she'd had last semester—over her shoulder and storming out of the dining hall, her breakfast left untouched on the plate that had been delivered along with ours sometime during all of our bickering.

"Fuck," I muttered, leaning back in my chair and scrubbing a hand across my face. "I'm not sure that went very well."

Noah sagged in his own chair. "She's lumped us in with our parents and will never trust us again."

"And we shouldn't trust her either," Bennett added, like an asshole.

We really had a long way to go.

CHAPTER FIVE

NOAH



"Do you have something you want to tell us?"

Zach had cornered Bennett in the noisy hallway as soon as we'd exited the dining hall. We'd made our escape quickly after Jolie had stomped away from us in a rage, all of us wanting to avoid being stared at any longer by the masses.

Bennett eyed Zach, annoyed, before he blew out a breath, signaling his surrender.

"It was a mistake," he said, sounding glum, but it did not escape my notice that Bennett James Spencer actually had a slight flush to his cheeks at the memory of his apparently *getting Jolie off* in the locker room showers. "A costly one," he added.

Zach grinned like this was the best news ever and not a sticky complication to an already well and truly fucked situation. "No, it wasn't. If she hadn't made it into Spencer Tower after that, she might still be hiding from us. All of it led us to exactly where we are now—back with our girl. You thinking with your dick for once in your life did us a favor. But I'll admit, I'm pretty fucking jealous, man."

So was I, but I would not be admitting it.

Bennett wiped away the wistful look that had crept onto his face, replacing it with his usual scowl after Zach snickered at him. He looked at me. "Tell me that at least *you* are seeing sense. Nothing

about that little meeting inspired confidence that she'll do the right thing."

"No, it did not," I agreed. "And I don't think we should be surprised. The girl we got to know last semester is the *real* her, even if her name was fake. I didn't think she'd just show up here as Jolie and suddenly be the sweet, happy girl we used to know or another demure Academy debutante who only cares about clothes, diamonds, and rich men. She's still the same stubborn, reckless—"

"Hot," Zach added.

"Troublemaker," Bennett finished.

"Yes, okay, you're both following," I said with a frustrated sigh. "And she's got to be carrying a lot of trauma from that night. She *needs* this war, so it won't be easy to talk her down. I just…." I sagged against the wall, closing my eyes to concentrate on blocking out the terrible memories threatening to overwhelm me, and I whispered, "I can't lose her again."

"Me neither," Zach agreed quietly.

I opened my eyes to find Bennett staring at his shoes, his jaw tense, but he didn't have to say the words.

He was angry, and he was going to stand for his Family, but I knew he'd die before he let her get hurt again.

We split up, Bennett on his way to his morning Lit Seminar, while Zach and I trudged to the third floor of Holywell Hall to our Finance class.

We entered the large lecture hall five minutes before the start of class, taking our usual seats in the center, near the back of the room. We watched as students filled in around us—all freshman and sophomores in this class—with the Tier Ones snagging the seats in our immediate vicinity, the Tier Two kids fanning around them, and the few scholarship students taking what was left.

"What's up, man?" Dane Jefferson said to Zach as he offered his fist for Zach to bump before dropping into the row in front of us. "How was the break?"

"It was interesting," Zach replied, distracted as his eyes snagged on something at the front of the room.

Dane followed his gaze. "I'll, uh… I'll bet."

Jolie had entered the room, the picture of calm now, with Mari Anzaldua by her side. She ran those beautiful, vibrant eyes over the faces of our classmates—almost like a warning—before she and Mari climbed the steps toward the back of the classroom.

“Ugh, of course *she’s* in this class,” Lisa Aviano huffed from next to Dane. She’d practically elbowed six girls out of the way to snag the seat nearest to Zach. She turned around to give him her flirty eyes. “But you guys are going to handle her, right? Mom says she’s a pretender, and we all saw how trashy she was last semester anyhow.” She looked beyond us, raising her voice. “We all know Knight is *dead*.”

“Oh shit!” Dane laughed, turning around like he wanted a high-five or something.

Zach just stared at them both, his lazy smirk dripping with disdain as he worried at his lip ring. Meanwhile, Jolie found her way to a seat in the row behind us, her backpack thudding to the floor before she and Mari sat down. I shook my head at Dane, doing my best to keep my face neutral while I waited for the shit to hit the fan.

“You know what, Lisa?” Jolie said from behind us with a chuckle. “Just for that, I have a surprise for you and all of your Tier One brethren. Tell your mom I made it extra special for you for being a deplorable cunt.”

Shit. I whipped around in my chair just in time to see her casually typing something into her phone while Mari giggled next to her.

“Jolie,” I said, my voice stern. “Whatever it is you think you’re doing—don’t.”

She punched one more button before locking her screen and dropping the phone on the desktop. She looked at me with a teasing glint in her eyes. “You know, Noah, I wasn’t expecting the bossy vibes from you. That was always Bennett’s thing, but you have surprised me a few times now.”

I couldn’t help the coy smile that spread across my face despite the fact that I knew she was about to start trouble.

“If you only knew, Jojo,” I whispered, while Zach snorted a laugh next to me. She peered down at me, curiosity piqued, and I winked at her before I said, gently, “Why don’t you be a good girl and tell me what you’re up to?”

She bit down on the cap of the pen she'd been twirling in her hand, now studying me with great interest, and I lapped it up until the loud vibrations of several phones jolted me back to reality.

"Oh fuck," Dane swore as he swiped open his phone.

More buzzing came from other phones around us.

"*What the—*"

"*Wait, how did—*"

I grabbed my phone, shooting a message to the head of my tech team, and she responded within twenty seconds with a link.

"Oh, Jojo, you menace," Zach said with a laugh, looking at his own phone.

I opened the link to the report from my team. A package of sorts had just been sent electronically to each outside shareholder of every Tier One-owned company in the City. These were the investors without ties to the City—those that lived elsewhere in the country and overseas, many of whom may not yet have heard Jolie's allegations or at least not seen the full picture. The package contained an affidavit from Jolie herself telling the story of her parents' murder—along with the video from the Holiday Ball and all of the pieces of evidence she'd stolen from our Family vaults, neatly arranged. There were also apparently descriptions and illustrations of each company's ties or involvement with the Four Families.

Jolie had somehow launched this from her phone sixty seconds ago. I had a feeling she was also responsible for the fact that the videos that had been floating around the internet since that night kept popping back up even after the Families had them taken down.

"You bitch!" Lisa cried. "Stop harassing our investors with your insane bullshit!"

"They won't believe it, anyway," Dane muttered.

No, some *would* believe it—the outsiders weren't as loyal, weren't as ingrained in the City or brainwashed by the opulence of the Four Families. I watched from my portal as shareholders in businesses in which Hargraves had an interest were already selling off their shares, many at bargain rates since we'd seen the value of all Family-connected enterprises take a bit of a dip after Jolie went public.

My phone buzzed, and I put it to my ear.

“Sir, many of the shares being sold by outside groups are being picked up by a Knight Acquisitions, Inc.,” my team lead informed me. “We have no information on this company, but we can hazard a guess.”

“We can,” I said grimly. “Thanks.”

I hung up, turning again to look at Jolie, who was chatting with Mari like nothing at all was happening.

Her eyes met mine, and they sparkled with pleased triumph. I didn’t know if I wanted to spank her or kiss her.

“So, it’s like that, is it?” I asked.

“It is,” she replied, her smile dimming. “Did you think I was going to just sit around and hope for the best?”

It was probably me who had been sitting around, hoping for the best.

“No,” I replied. “But I wish you would.”



After our morning classes had finished, the three of us skipped lunch in the dining hall, choosing instead to deal with shit from our dorm before we had to go back to class. The Tier One businesses who were hit the hardest had immediately looked to the Families for help, and everyone was scrambling to prepare a statement that would once again make Jolie out to be a poor, confused orphan with misplaced anger.

We’d each fielded angry (or in my case, disappointed) texts from our parents like it was somehow our fault that Jolie got the jump on the Families yet again. Bennett had managed to stem the bleeding from one of Harper’s dad’s companies by personally calling the largest outside shareholder, who was based in Belgium, and talking him out of selling his shares.

When I stalked into my Chemistry lab that afternoon in a mood, I was not expecting a seating chart like we were in middle school.

And I definitely was not expecting to be paired with Jolie as my lab partner for the entire semester.

She was already seated at the lab table when I approached, reading something on her tablet and absently twirling that pen through her nimble fingers again. A strand of her white-blonde hair had fallen out of her ponytail and across her face, and I resisted the sudden, consuming urge to sweep it behind her ear.

She glanced up at me as I sat down on my stool, our workspaces separated by a small sink and row of drawers built into the table. “Hey, partner,” she said casually.

Before I could respond, Annie stalked up the center aisle, her thin legs on full display in her short navy skirt and her giant designer handbag thrown over her shoulder. “Ugh, Noah, I cannot believe the professor sat you with her and not with me. He should know better.” She tossed her bag down on the table behind us. “What are *you* looking at?”

“Annie, always a pleasure,” Mari murmured, seated at the station behind Jolie.

“I’ll speak to the professor after class,” Annie said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “I’m sure I can get him to trade seats.”

In all honesty, I probably should have tried to avoid being stuck with Jolie as my lab partner for the entire semester. It wouldn’t be good for my… focus.

But Annie Ling had participated in a scheme that put our Jojo in a dangerous situation last semester where she’d almost been *raped*. It wasn’t something I was going to get over, and I’d already put my team on making sure I’d be able to… *contain* Annie, if necessary.

So instead of capitulating to the daughter of my dad’s closest ally, I replied, uncharacteristically terse, “No, thank you, Annie. I think you’ll remember that Jolie and I are old friends. We should be able to work together just fine.”

She gasped, withdrawing her hand from my shoulder to literally clutch her pearls. “But Noah. She’s spreading evil *lies* about your Family!”

“Whereas you’re practically spreading your *legs* right here in this classroom,” Mari snapped at her. “*Joder*, just sit in your damn seat. You can stare at Noah’s ass from back here.”

Jolie snorted, and I could only roll my eyes as Annie sat down on her stool in a huff.

“Such a lady-killer these days,” Jolie mused to me in a whisper. “I should’ve seen it coming. That sunshine smile could melt even the iciest of panties.”

I gave her that very smile, turning the charm up to a thousand, well aware that I should probably quit engaging with her like this but unable to stop myself. “Hmm, maybe,” I replied, arching a playful brow. “But being an Heir to billions helps more, I think.”

She blinked at me, looking a little dazed, before shaking her head and going right back to studying the syllabus.

I liked that particular reaction way too much.

The professor finally called the class to attention, diving straight into the lesson with harried scrawls on the whiteboard. After an hour of lecture, we were turned loose to work through a practical.

I’d been off in my head for most of the class, puzzling over the chaos my best friend’s return from the dead had wrought. As I watched more Hargraves-connected companies lose investors through my team’s constant updates, I found that I didn’t feel angry or panicked or anything else I was probably supposed to be feeling.

I found myself almost *enjoying* the fact that my father would have to pop his head up from wherever he was to deal with it. And I was intrigued and a little dumbfounded as to how Jolie had managed this.

Not that she would ever tell me.

I let out a frustrated sigh at the thought.

“You mad at me, Noah?” she murmured from next to me as she fiddled with some beakers.

I looked at her, the relief that she was *here* flooding my veins as it did every time I laid eyes on her, but that feeling was constantly at war with the sadness and the hurt over all the time we’d lost when it didn’t have to be that way.

“I’m… upset, Jojo,” I replied. “I’m upset that you didn’t feel like you could come to us—that you decided to *deceive* us instead. I’m gutted that we could’ve had the last seven years with you if we’d just somehow known you were still alive. And I’m frustrated and frankly terrified that you’re going to end up dead anyway if you keep this up.”

She met my eyes, and I saw some of the sadness I felt reflected back at me. “This was what kept me going, Noah,” she said, her

voice soft. “I have to do this—for *them*. It was never about you—or Bennett or Zach—but unfortunately, you’re your parents’ sons, and that means I’m coming for your legacy. I won’t let what they did stand. I *can’t*.” She sighed, turning back to her work. “We’re on opposite sides of this war, and I’m sorry for that.”

I turned on my stool to face her fully. “Maybe you shouldn’t have assumed so much about the three of us. Maybe you should have trusted that the bond we all once shared was strong enough that when faced with what it would mean to have *you* back in our lives, our priorities would have been in the right order.”

We sat there, staring at each other in silence for another minute until the professor dismissed the class. Jolie sighed, packed up her bag, and stood up from her chair.

As she made her way past me, she paused and whispered, “I missed you guys too.”

And then she was gone again.

CHAPTER SIX

JOLIE



"So, how's Heir life treating you today?"

Max's voice emanated from where my phone lay on the counter of my luxurious bathroom in my new condo in A Dorm. I'd taken a long bath in my clawfoot tub last night, and I was now leaning over my gold-flecked sink as I applied my mascara in the large mirror, its ornate filigree frame glinting under the bright white lights of the vanity.

There was, of course, no fourth bedroom available for me in the giant top-floor condo renovated especially for the Heirs, but after applying some *light* pressure to the Academy's housing office, they'd magically found a vacant two-bedroom unit just one floor below.

I'd loved my little room in C Dorm, but I was an *Heir* now, so it was A Dorm or bust.

Mari and I had moved in last night, with the burgeoning Knight empire footing the bill for both of us. She'd put up a token resistance to my request to be my roommate rent-free before squealing with glee and packing her room faster than I'd known she could move.

"Well, the day is young," I replied to Max, reaching for my dark-pink lip stain. "That little exercise yesterday hopefully demonstrated to the Tier One assholes that I'm serious."

"I'd say so," Dom chimed in. "I know we did it mostly to screw with them, but the acquisitions team reported it was actually a pretty

successful day."

Life had been a blur since I'd jumped off the roof of Spencer Tower a little more than a month ago. While I'd suspected that Frankie would keep my secret, he was unpredictable, and I couldn't risk it. I'd disappeared from the Academy to go home, and I'd thrown myself into working with Dom, Max, and our team of Shadows to accelerate my plans to come out as the Knight Heir and publicly declare war on the Families.

We'd stripped the dye from my hair, and I'd tossed the collection of color contacts I'd amassed over the years. We'd prepared the evidence I'd stolen from each of the Families over the course of the semester to be handed over to the press because the cops in the City were bought and paid for, so they were of no use to me. My lawyers—two sharp women in their forties who'd worked in the Knight organization before being recruited over to the Shadows after my parents' deaths—began the process to form my first company. They'd also reached out to the chairman of the Knight Foundation, who was an old friend of my parents and as neutral as one could be in this City, to begin the process of returning my inheritance.

Now I was flush with cash, and so was our operation.

A knock sounded at my bathroom door. "Chica*,* we're going to be late, and I wanted a waffle," Mari whined.

"I'll buy you a waffle maker for our kitchen!" I called back as I put the finishing touches on my hair—a long braid over one shoulder today.

"Oooh, I love having a sugar mama," she gushed, and I heard the sound of high heels clicking on the shiny hardwood of my bedroom floor as she retreated, shouting, "I want one of the ones shaped like Texas!"

Weirdo.

"Weirdo," Max said.

A few days before the Holiday Ball, I'd called Mari and told her I needed her at our apartment in Olde Town for an emergency situation. Like the good friend she was, she'd appeared at our door less than half an hour later. After taking in my real hair and eye color, she'd been so shocked that Max had to carry her to the couch, where we all sat as I told her my entire story.

She'd cursed and yelled, feeling more than a little betrayed that the person she'd thought was her best friend was a fabrication, before she'd dissolved into tears over the real tragedy of my life and loss. Then she'd hopped down from Max's lap, dusted herself off, and prepped me to look killer at the Holiday Ball, where I was going to look James Spencer himself in his haughty fucking face and tell him I was coming for him.

And I'd done it. I'd managed—by the skin of my teeth—to control the urge to launch myself off that stage and bury my knife in his heart. I'd kept my composure and delivered my message, and I'd left that hall mostly unscathed.

Mostly, because nothing could have really prepared me to watch as Bennett, Zach, and Noah comprehended—before just about anyone else in that room—that their best friend Jojo was back from the dead.

And she'd been under their noses, masquerading as Joanna Miller, the scholarship student from the wrong side of the tracks, for months without them suspecting a thing.

It was like I saw their hearts breaking in real time. My heart had broken in the same way but gradually—little by little over the first few years as I had to accept the fact that even though my best friends were just across the river, I couldn't see them. I couldn't talk to them. I couldn't hug them while I cried for my parents. I couldn't tell them I was okay or see how they were holding up after being forced to watch that horrific scene.

And then I'd had more years to bury those feelings, to let my boys go, to blur the memories of my old friends into my anger and hatred for the Families.

They'd had to feel a lot of things within a span of about three minutes, and watching it unfold had almost cracked those rickety fractures in my heart back open again. I saw the shock, the horror, the relief, and the betrayal on each of their faces—and it now seemed like the three of them had landed in different places as to how they felt about it all.

Zach seemed ready to welcome me back into the Heir fold, but it remained to be seen how much of that was genuine. It could all still be a game to him after all.

Noah, by his own admission, was upset with me and would be nursing his hurt feelings for who knew how long. Then he'd have to decide if he was with me or against me because there was no middle ground.

As for Bennett, he was angry, probably for many reasons, but I wasn't going to let his attitude deter me.

Bennett Spencer didn't scare me.

I should scare *him*.

"Okay, honey, we'll let you go," Dom said. "Your brother needs to get his ass to school, anyway."

"Bye, Jojo!" Max called in the background. "See you at home for the long weekend?"

"Yep, I'll be there," I replied, zipping my makeup bag and fluffing my braid. "Tell the rest of the team to take it easy for a few days, since our little experiment worked so well."

"You got it, boss," Dom said with a laugh, ending the call.

I took one last look in the mirror, smoothing my burgundy cashmere sweater that I'd paired with the tight, dark blue jeans I'd spent eight hundred fucking dollars on during my shopping spree over the break with Mari so I could "look like an Heir." I stuck my little knife in my new motorcycle boots—also a new purchase that'd cost me four figures, but damn was the black leather soft and supple—and I was ready to go.

Mari escorted me to the dining hall as usual, veering off to the buffet line after we entered and picking up a trail of fanboys and girls on her way like some kind of rich kid Pied Piper. The same thing had happened yesterday, and today there were even more of them. This told me there was a minority contingent of students who weren't so sure the Families hadn't committed an atrocious murder, or at least they were hedging their bets by attempting to get in with the Knight Heir—and they were trying to go through Mari to do it.

Feeling the stares of the other students hitting me from all sides as I walked confidently down the aisle between the rows of long wooden tables, I set my sights again on the little private table up on the dais at the front of the room. It was empty, since I'd beaten the other Heirs here this morning.

As I approached, I spotted the dean standing off to the side of the platform, conversing with the dining manager with a serious look on her face. Spying me, she quickly ended her conversation and strode up and onto the dais, positioning herself in front of the empty table to stare down at me.

“A moment, please, Miss Knight,” she said, her words terse.

I stood there, arms crossed, irritated that Dean Jansen was looming above me like I should find her intimidating.

I didn’t.

“What’s going on here, Princess?” Zach’s voice sounded from behind me, and he appeared at my side a moment later, looking disheveled and hot, per his usual.

Noah came around to my other side, wearing a perfectly fitted gray vest and a bowtie, while Bennett stepped beside him, sharp in his navy suit and just as pissed off as I was that he was having to crane his entitled neck to look up at the dean.

“I apologize, Mr. Spencer,” Dean Jansen said, more placating toward him than she was with me—go figure. “But the Academy has decided to… do away with the Heirs’ table. We encourage the Heirs to mix amongst your peers—the ones you deem worthy of your attention, of course—as this is one of the most *opportune* times for networking with the top-tier students.”

Bennett glared at her while Zach snorted out a laugh. “Are we just calling James Spencer ‘the Academy’ now?”

Her eyes darted to me before landing on Zach, her annoyance with his attitude wrestling with her reverence for his station, before she said, patiently, “As you know, Mr. Ferrero, all three of your parents are on the Academy’s Board of Trustees. They advise on our policies as needed.”

“Well,” I said with a shrug of my shoulder, not wanting to draw this nonsense out. “It looks like the Families would rather there be no Heirs on a pedestal than risk the visual of all four of us together every day, lending me any legitimacy.”

“Yep,” Noah muttered under his breath, “since having you bodily removed from the table would look… uncivilized.” He glanced at me. “Because we all know it would have come to that.”

I chuckled. It sure would have.

“No problem, Dean Jansen,” I went on, giving her a shitty smile. “I’m sure Harper will relish the opportunity to sit near her betrothed during meals.”

Bennett let out a harsh breath of annoyance, darting his narrowed eyes at me with a look that screamed, “Quit your bullshit,” and he got my middle finger in return.

“Don’t worry, gentlemen,” the dean added, finished with me and only addressing the three of them now. “I will ensure that the students understand your place among them has not changed.”

Noah glanced at me with a worried look, like I was a bomb that was about to go off, but I kept myself in check.

This was weak shit, all things considered. I’d proved yesterday to the Families’ Tier One underlings that I wasn’t to be fucked with, and I’d do it again and again until it stuck.

“Let’s go,” Bennett said between gritted teeth, jerking his head in the direction of the open space at the front table near the usual Tier One assholes.

Knowing he wasn’t talking to me, I turned to head across the aisle to the other front table where Mari was holding court.

Before I could take a step, a large hand gently encircled my bicep, and a deep, honeyed voice dripped into my ear.

“There’ll always be a spot for you next to me, Princess,” Zach murmured, his words full of unspoken promises. “You belong with us —I don’t give a fuck what anyone else says.”

I tossed a skeptical eyebrow at him over my shoulder, mentally waving away the vagina flutters his sexy voice elicited. “I think it’s still two against one there, Ferrero. And if you think I’d ever voluntary dine with the three bitches who tried to have me sexually assaulted —or *Chad*—you’re delusional. The fact that you three continue to associate with the likes of them disgusts me.”

His cocky smirk morphed into a pouty frown. I scoffed at him, cute as he was, removing my arm from his grip and sauntering over to Mari. She’d cleared the chair next to her with little more than pursed lips and an arched eyebrow at the poor soul who had been sitting there.

As I took my seat, the dean cleared her throat from the platform where she still stood. The room quieted almost instantly, no one

missing that the Heirs had been diverted from their usual thrones. The weighty feel of anticipation permeated the entire room.

“Hello, Holywell students!” Dean Jansen called to the hushed crowd. “If you’ll just allow me a few minutes to interrupt your breakfast, the Academy feels it would be best to quickly address the… *issue* of the return of the missing daughter of the dearly departed Knight Family.”

Oh, so I had been *missing* now and not definitely declared dead while James, Peter, and Andrea danced on my family’s graves.

Rich.

“The Families feel, and the Academy agrees, that the status of Heir is befitting only of the children of the Families that have been raised as such, with all of the proper education, special skills, and… *social interactions* befitting of the most prestigious Families in the City.” She glanced my way, wrinkling her nose in disgust in a manner that her daughter had definitely inherited. “Additionally, the title of Heir is intended for the up-and-coming leaders of the largest and most successful business empires in the City. As such, we recognize the three Heirs of Spencer, Ferrero, and Hargraves as the *only* Heirs. While the Academy is relieved that Miss Knight has been found alive after all of these years, she is no longer an Heir to a Family empire, and it is a known fact that she has spent her adolescence outside of our higher society and is, well, *behind*.” She gave me a pinched smile, trying and failing to convey something like sympathy. “Miss Knight is, of course, welcome to assimilate amongst our top-tier students to the best of her ability. I am sure they will all be… thrilled to help her adjust.”

The snickering had started over at the shithead table before the dean had finished speaking. The muttering at my table was, at least, a bit more confused and a little aghast that the Academy would *dare*.

I took half a second to clock the guys’ reactions to this bullshit, and the three of them continued to appear annoyed but unsurprised by any of this.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have sandbagged my grades quite so much last semester,” I mused to Mari. I’d done just enough to keep my scholarship but not draw attention by outperforming what a Southside High School education should have enabled. “I could’ve at

least nipped the inferior *education* argument in the bud, but hindsight is 20/20, and all that shit."

"You what?" she hissed at me. "Even your grades were a lie? You're such a sneaky bitch." She cracked a smile. "I love it."

As the dean exited the stage without another glance my way, I realized I was going to need a more visceral show of force for these dipshits to comprehend that I was not actually some poor orphan from the Southside about to be trampled on by the City's elite.

I had an idea, but I'd need to get through the rest of the day first, and something told me the dean had just given all my old bullies permission to escalate once again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JOLIE



Sophomore-level Economics was my first class of the day, and as was my usual luck, two of the Heirs were also in attendance. As I slunk across the front of the large auditorium-style lecture hall, I also spotted almost the whole Tier One goon squad, including Lisa, Annie, Chad, Dane, and their usual hangers on as they hovered in the general vicinity of Zach and Bennett.

Chad had been *very* quiet since school had started back up, his perpetual glower in my direction telling me that he was still seething about the collar I'd put on him last semester. Out of everyone, including my former best friends, he'd actually seemed the least surprised by my real identity.

I gave him a taunting wink as I crossed the front of the room, and if his big meaty hand didn't snap his phone in half with the rage grip he had on it, I suspected it was at least dented a bit.

Zach caught my eye as I ascended the shallow stairs at the far side of the classroom, and he motioned me over to where he and Bennett sat in their usual chosen spots in the middle of the room.

Bennett watched me intently as I made my way over, the fact that his eyes were always on me apparently no longer a thing he took care to hide. I was officially the enemy now, so I supposed he had an excuse to watch my every move.

Zach practically shoved Dane out of the seat next to him before sliding over, leaving his chair open and making a space for me right between him and Bennett.

“Hey, boys,” I cooed at them as I dropped into the open seat. “Be careful, this room is full of tattletales. Can’t let them think you guys like me or anything.”

Zach shot me his sexy smirk. “Can’t let them think we care what they think.”

Bennett simmered next to me. “This is a bad idea.”

“Tired of me already, Bennett?”

He turned to look at me, those mossy green eyes boring into mine with a ferocity that I felt down to my bones. “Tired of you stirring up trouble? Yes. But I’ll never get tired of seeing you breathing, Jolie.”

My heart squeezed dangerously, and I shut that shit down before I did something stupid like climb into his lap and bury my face into the crook of his neck—or start fondly reminiscing about the brain-melting orgasm he’d given me with his skilled fingers—just because he quit being an ass for two seconds.

I blew out a breath and turned away from him, and I’d just pulled my shiny new Knight laptop from my bag when two girls appeared in front of me, hovering in the space between our desks and the row below with nervous looks on their faces.

Hannah Langford, heiress to a massive tech venture capital firm that was historically associated with Knight, spoke first.

“Langford Capital welcomes you back, Jolie,” she said with a formal air, darting an anxious glance over at Bennett. Her parents’ company was mostly allied with Spencer these days. “And I wanted to make sure you knew that we’d welcome the chance to do business with Knight again, should the opportunity arise.”

Bennett glared at her, annoyed, but he didn’t intervene. She was boldly declaring her family’s allegiance to Knight right in front of him instead of doing it privately, earning her my respect.

She motioned to the girl with the blonde pixie cut next to her who was looking up at me with big, curious brown eyes. “This is Devin Kelly. Her family owns the biotech firm that is the largest in our group.”

Devin nodded respectfully to me before she said, “My uncle was close with your father before he passed. He would welcome a chance to work with Knight again.”

“I appreciate it, ladies,” I replied. “I’ll have my team reach out.”

They hurried away, revealing the glares of the other top-tier students where they sat in the rows in front of us.

“Hannah, I can’t believe you,” Lisa hissed at her as she took a seat nearby. “That was so *stupid*.”

Hannah just tossed her dark-red hair over her shoulder before she snapped, “If you ever decide to start thinking with your head instead of your vagina, *Lisa*, you might consider whether there’s writing on the wall you’re ignoring.”

I snorted as Lisa essentially proved Hannah’s point by turning to Zach with a pouty lip and a sultry smile, declaring, “Aviano would *never* betray Ferrero like that.”

Zach acknowledged her, barely, with a lazy nod before leaning in to whisper in my ear, “Look at *our girl*—getting the hang of this shit already.”

“Your girl?” He’d wrapped his tongue around those words like he meant something more than just “our best friend.”

“Zach,” Bennett snapped. “Not here.”

Zach only chuckled, turning his attention to the whiteboard, but not before he gave me a sexy wink.

Class dragged on, as the professors of Holywell Academy did not believe in the concept of “syllabus day” and always just dove right into the material. I took copious notes, determined to come out at the top of all of my classes this semester.

After all, Bennett and Noah both kept up a 4.0 GPA, and Zach was right behind them with a respectable 3.8. The Heirs had to be on top of everything, including Holywell academics, and I needed to prove I could do the same.

When the professor finally dismissed the class, I watched as everyone began to pack their shit and make their way to the aisles in a chaotic flurry of movement. Furtive glances were tossed in our direction, our classmates no doubt waiting for more fireworks to erupt between Zach, Bennett, and me, but we managed to sit in companionable silence.

I tried not to relish how normal it felt.

“So, this is *the* Jolie Knight,” a deep, smooth voice said from the row below us.

I glanced down to see a tall sandy-haired guy ambling our way, bright smile on full display and his light brown eyes honed on me like a laser.

He came to a stop in front of me. “I was abroad last semester and apparently missed quite the event.” He stuck out a hand. “Raiford Montgomery. Let me be the first of the top students to *welcome* you back to the Academy, Jolie. I heard you weren’t treated very well last semester.”

Then this idiot dared to toss a scolding look at both Zach and Bennett. I couldn’t help but peek at both of them and found they wore matching looks of absolute loathing that said Raiford here was on borrowed time if he kept up his shit.

I held in a snort as I reached out to clasp his hand. “Thanks, Raiford.”

“Call me Raif,” he said, smile widening as he held my hand and gave me an appreciative once-over.

Zach growled next to me, and I elbowed him out of habit like I would have when we were kids.

I hadn’t recognized him until he introduced himself, but Raiford was the son of the owner of Montgomery Star Media—a hugely profitable entertainment empire based in the City that was only very loosely affiliated with Ferrero. They were as close to independent as a company could get in this town, and it was not entirely surprising that he’d come sniffing after me.

He was tall and easy on the eyes—conventionally attractive if you liked pretty boys who looked like they spent a lot of time on their yacht, which I did not. He had a muscular body that said he spent time in the gym, but he didn’t have anything on the two Heirs seated next to me.

“Thanks, Raif,” I repeated, pulling my hand away.

“Of course. You just let me know if you need *anything*.” He gave me a suggestive smile and a wink before shooting another shitty look at Zach and Bennett that said he had a death wish, and then he moseyed on by us and toward the door.

“Well, that asshole’s on borrowed time,” Zach grumbled. “Don’t fall for his shit, Princess.”

“He needs to watch himself,” Bennett muttered, glowering at Raif’s back as he exited the classroom.

I stood up, throwing my backpack over my shoulder before rolling my eyes at both of them. “God forbid one of your peons shows some respect to the Knight Heir. I suggest you get used to it.” I looked at Bennett. “Or are you going to go along with all this bullshit and try to convince me I’m not actually an Heir, after all?”

Bennett stood up too—probably just so he could tower over me, the tall asshole—and he pinned me with a steely look as he said, “Convince me you deserve it, Jolie. Because from where I sit, you just look like an angry little girl throwing a temper tantrum.”

“Dude,” Zach barked, sounding taken aback, and I was with him there.

Bennett might as well have slapped me in the face.

I stepped toe to toe with him, getting right up in his personal space—a position I kept finding myself in with him—and I jammed my dark-purple manicured finger into his broad chest. “Did you just call my desire to avenge the cold-blooded murder of my parents a *temper tantrum*, you heartless fucking bastard?”

For a moment, I could have sworn a look of utter despair crossed his face before he wiped it away, choosing instead to bend down to rasp his growly whisper right up against my ear. “This war you’ve declared against the Families is futile. The sooner you realize that, the sooner we can *all* move on.”

Then he turned and marched away—wise, because I was two seconds from throat-punching his infuriating ass.

Zach let out a frustrated sigh. “Princess….”

I whirled on him, my angry finger now pointed in his face. “Don’t,” I snapped. “Don’t make excuses for him.”

I stomped away, now wound tight with *feelings* I needed to work out.

Tonight couldn’t come soon enough.

The gym, pristine as always but still smelling vaguely of both sweat and lemon-scented cleaner, was full to the brim for the first Fight Night of the semester.

I'd watched from my perch on a top bleacher as the first rounds of fights had gone on without much excitement. Chad was still an overinflated sadist. John Tyler Ashmore was back to pummel his opponent into the ground and look bored while doing it. Even Raiford the pretty boy got into the ring and boxed a senior to a draw.

"Are you sure about this?" Mari asked me for the tenth time. She reclined next to me in her black playsuit, her legs crossed as she bounced her red stiletto nervously on her foot. "I have seen the aftermath of your rage and all, but this could go tits up quickly."

"They've got to see me as an equal, Mari," I replied as I wrapped my hands. "So we're going with the shock and awe approach."

Finally, Dane appeared in the center of the makeshift ring on the gym floor, his red hair glowing orange under the solitary fluorescent light, and he put his bullhorn to his lips.

"Alright, Holywell Fight Night fans!" he shouted. "We have our current reigning champion here if anyone is brave enough—or perhaps stupid enough—to challenge him for his title!"

As expected, Zach appeared from the shadows, dressed in a tight white T-shirt and black sweatpants. His tattooed arms were crossed over his chest, those delicious biceps bulging as he cast his dark gaze around the gym with a challenging smirk.

Bennett and Noah lingered on the perimeter, Noah still in his navy vest and tie and Bennett in his crew practice clothes, both of them looking bored and ready for the night to be over already.

"So, who wants to try their luck against the Ferrero Heir?" Dane called out, spinning in a circle and making a show of looking for takers.

The crowd cheered and shouted for Zach, who could only grin lazily. He knew, as I did, that there was no one left who'd dare hop in the ring with him.

I jumped to my feet, landing with a loud thunk atop my bleacher, and I shouted down to the gym floor. "Hey, Dane!"

The room quieted instantly. The students in the rows below me craned their necks around to search for the source of my voice.

I tromped down the stairs and stepped into the light. “I will.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

ZACH



"Shit," Bennett and Noah swore behind me when Jojo appeared ringside, looking like my dirtiest fantasy and my worst nightmare all at once.

She wore a hot pink T-shirt cropped so that it showed off a large swath of her flawless, toned stomach. Her black yoga pants fit her like a second skin, and she'd woven her white-blonde hair into a tight French braid. Her hands were wrapped and taped with the skill of someone who was no stranger to martial arts, and her feet were bare, those perfect toes taunting me as she approached.

"Nope, no fucking way," I said to Dane. "I will not fight her. I'm not beating the shit out of a girl, and especially not *that* girl."

"I, uh," Dane stammered, scratching the back of his head with his bullhorn. "I mean, I guess you could forfeit, but do you really wanna do that? To, uh… *her*, in particular?"

She continued into the ring, the circle of shirtless, sweaty dudes that surrounded us parting for her without a word. Somehow in the midst of my freakout, I still had the wherewithal to plan the violent murder of the seven or eight guys I witnessed blatantly check out Jojo's ass as she passed them.

"What's the matter, Zach?" she asked, moving to the opposite corner of the thick mat and dropping her backpack to the floor. The fluorescent bulb above us lit up her every feature, those icy eyes

alight with determination and mischief. “Is the Ferrero Heir afraid to fight a girl?”

I just glared at her in silence, knowing Bennett would step in to be a dick about this, and he did not disappoint me.

“Are you fucking joking, Jolie?” he hissed, marching to the edge of the mat and into the light so the entire gym could get a look at his furious face. “I know you’ve seen Zach fight—you don’t stand a chance. Stop this lunacy this instant.”

She ignored him, of course, choosing instead to rip her pink shirt over her head to reveal a shiny black sports bra and that tight, hot body the three of us had quietly obsessed over back when we were creeping on Joanna Miller’s morning workouts for *reasons*. A chorus of wolf whistles sounded from around us, and now Bennett and I were both sending murderous glares around the ring.

Noah stepped up next to Bennett, the slight frown tugging at his mouth only hinting at the level of distress I was sure he felt. “Jolie, please,” he said quietly. “Zach doesn’t want to hurt you.”

She’d bent over to rummage in her bag, and she paused to peek up at him with a wicked grin. “But what if I’m into that, Noah?”

“Jolie,” he snapped, quickly arriving at the end of his patience. “Do not do this.”

“No,” she bit back, standing up and pulling two long wooden sticks from her bag that I recognized as bastons—a weapon used in the Filipino martial art of Eskrema. “You three, the Academy, and this entire fucking City need to take me seriously. I am an *Heir*, and it’s time everyone realized I’m not here to fuck around.”

She kicked her bag to the side and began to bounce on her feet, swinging her bastons in fast circles around her arms in an expert display that had my fucking jaw nearly on the floor.

The crowd gasped, their whispers and murmurs increasing in volume as one by one they realized, as I had, that maybe we’d underestimated our Princess.

Jojo paused her twirling to ask me with all the nonchalance in the world, “Weapons okay?”

I glanced at Bennett and Noah, giving them a sharp nod.

Noah sighed, dragging a hand down his face in frustration, while Bennett produced a knife from the stash we kept in my gym bag. I’d

never touched the baston, but I'd dabbled in Eskrima and done some fighting with a knife, so I happened to have a baraw.

And I also now had a plan.

I took the long knife from Bennett, then I looked at Dane. "Fighters have chosen weapons. First blood wins."

Dane whooped and switched his bullhorn on. "We've got a special treat for you all tonight! We have the Ferrero Heir versus the *wannabe* Knight Heir, and the fighters have chosen to use weapons! First to draw blood will win the fight and become the Holywell Fight Night reigning champion!"

The crowd roared, their bloodlust permeating the dank air of the gym. Jojo, though, just shook her head at me like she was disappointed.

"*Pussy*," she mouthed at me, definitely catching on that I was planning to nick her a little bit with my knife to end the fight quickly, which circumvented me having to hit her at all.

I gave her a dark look that said she was going to pay for this later, then I reached one hand behind my neck and yanked my T-shirt over my head. I hadn't been planning to fight tonight, but I did have my tight training shorts on under my sweatpants, so I shoved those to my ankles as I kept my eyes locked on my girl.

She watched me strip, entranced, and I preened at her heated perusal of my body.

That's right, Princess. This could all be yours if you'd just get with the program.

I twirled my knife with a few quick flicks of my wrist, my eyes still glued to her, while we both waited for Dane to give the signal.

He raised his bullhorn to his lips. "Fighters, ready…. Begin!"

The crowd roared, and then Jojo was on me.

She attacked like a cobra, slashing at my torso with a fast downward strike of her stick that I only managed to block with my blade by the skin of my teeth, unprepared for her speed. I recovered and countered quickly, lunging at her in an attempt to dislodge one of those damn sticks, but she dodged me with practiced ease. She struck at me again with both of her sticks one right after the other, and I parried them both before shoving her backwards with a loud grunt.

We danced apart, the sounds of the crowd deafening as Dane pumped them up, and it was all I could do to will myself not to get hard in my little shorts as I watched my girl twirl those bastons with fire in her eyes as she readied her next move.

As we circled each other, a realization dawned on me.

“I take it you’re the one that put Donavan in the hospital, Princess?” I called out to her.

She grinned like a shark. “It was you three that put him in the hospital. I put him on the floor to bleed out like rapist scum deserves.”

She wasn’t wrong. I’d acted like an asshole when it happened even though I’d actually felt sick that she’d been targeted that night because of me. Lisa had orchestrated all of that bullshit because I'd let myself indulge in Joanna Miller for a few short, glorious minutes on the dance floor.

So I’d pushed her away fast and hard like an *Heir* should have.

But she wasn’t Joanna Miller—she was our Jojo, and all bets were off now that she’d decided to show us all what kind of a fucking *warrior* had been hiding under those thrift store clothes and hair dye.

Obsessed would be putting it lightly.

I could only grin at her, proud of *our* girl for destroying that sick fuck, before she ran at me.

We clashed again, and I struck first this time, trying my very best to slash a shallow cut to her arm or thigh with my blade, but she beat me back with each and every thrust. We went around and around, back and forth, moving fluidly together around the ring like we were performing a ballroom dance instead of trying to make each other bleed.

She attacked, I defended, then I attacked, and she defended. The thrill of facing such a capable opponent almost overpowered the anger and frustration I felt at having to fight my Jojo in the first place.

Finally I broke away, spinning and dropping low to sweep my leg into her lower body in an attempt to bring her to the ground. She dove clear of my attack, rolling to her feet with her sticks still clutched in each hand as she turned to face me again. I smirked, spinning my knife through my fingers again as we orbited each other, both of us breathing hard and high on adrenaline.

“Will you stop fucking around and finish this?” Bennett hissed at me as I neared my corner.

“You think I’m fucking around?” I snapped back, and Jojo snorted.

“I want Bennett next,” she announced to Dane’s delight, but before he could put his bullhorn to his mouth again, Noah barked at him.

“Don't even fucking think about it, Jefferson.”

He let out a dramatic sigh before switching the bullhorn on again to shout, “Two minutes left! Will this be our first Fight Night title match to end in a draw?”

The boos sounded before morphing again into the shouts and cheers, the volume ratcheting up as the gym became one giant pressure cooker ready to explode at the first sight of blood.

Jolie’s eyes met mine for a split second, an understanding passing between us. We charged at each other, meeting in the middle of the ring in a violent clash of wood and steel. I slammed my blade into the stick in her left hand, finally dislodging it from her grip and launching it to the side of the ring. She transitioned immediately into fighting me with one stick, parrying each slash of my knife until she swung a lucky strike right at my closed fist, sending the knife sailing from my grip.

I jumped at her, grabbing her remaining stick with both hands and wrenching it away. She threw a punch at my face, which I blocked, but not before she buried her knee in my stomach.

“Fuck me, Princess,” I swore at her, barely blocking another punch as I doubled over.

“I don’t think so, Zach,” she retorted through big, panting breaths. “Wouldn’t want you to have to stick your dick in anything below your *standards*.”

Goddamn it, I was going to be paying for that comment for a million years.

I growled at her, my frustration mounting. I went all in, throwing my much bigger body at her and finally managing to tackle her to the ground.

We hit the mat, me landing on top before she rolled us, and I fought with everything I had to just pin her to the floor so I could take

a little bite out of her ear or something to just *end* this.

She kicked at me, managing to scramble out from under me, and I realized a split second later that we were a few feet away from my knife where it lay discarded on the edge of the mat.

She scurried toward it.

“Oh, I don’t think so, Princess,” I growled, grabbing her ankle and yanking her backward before she could get ahold of my baraw.

“Shit!” she yelled, turning to throw an elbow into my face, which hurt like a bitch, but unfortunately for her, my arms were longer than hers.

I had her now.

With a mighty roar, I swiped the knife from the floor and rolled her to her back in one fast, smooth motion. I pinned her beneath me and shoved the blade right up against her throat, glaring down at her with a look that dared her to fucking move a muscle.

The crowd went wild, Dane shouting something about time being up, but it all faded into the background as I stared down at my captive—my feisty, powerful, now spitting-mad Princess, who’d pushed me so hard through this fight that I’d wound up holding a goddamn knife to her pale, delicate throat.

“Do it,” she hissed at me. “Finish what your mom fucking started, Ferrero.”

That was a punch in the gut that knocked the breath from my chest. A current of bone-deep rage flooded my veins, and I fought to keep the hand that held the blade against her sweat-slicked skin from shaking dangerously.

“How *dare* you,” I growled, leaning down to get right in her face. “You want to know something, Princess? They told us they’d strangled you until you were dead, shoved you in a cement box next to your parents, and sank you to the bottom of the fucking Obsidian. Noah cried every night for months. I stopped sleeping completely because I spent my nights watching the door like a paranoid psycho. Bennett never smiled again. We imploded like a dying fucking supernova because we’d watched you *suffer*, and then you *died*, and our lives didn’t make any fucking sense without you.” I leaned in further, moving the last two inches I needed to press my sweaty forehead to hers, whispering, “So, how *dare* you insinuate that I

would ever do anything that would take you away from us again. It's *never* going to fucking happen, and you need to get that through your beautiful, stubborn head."

Her defiant glare had faded away as I spoke, her big eyes widening and those pretty lips parting ever so slightly as she stared at me—somehow speechless for the first time since she'd barreled back into our lives.

I was done with this whole fucking display.

I pulled the blade from her neck and tossed it aside before I dragged my body off of hers, standing up to face Dane.

"It's a draw," I announced, glaring around the gym and daring any stupid fucker to argue with me. "Show's over."

As the crowd grumbled over Dane's subsequent announcement and official ending of the night's festivities, I made my way back to my corner where Bennett and Noah stood with grim looks on their faces as they stared right past me, no doubt watching Jojo as she collected herself and left the ring.

"She's magnificent," Noah whispered.

"She's dangerous," Bennett countered.

She was both of those things, but most importantly—

"She's ours."

CHAPTER NINE

JOLIE



I stretched my aching muscles as I stood under the stream of scalding hot water, digging deep for the energy to drag myself out of my shower and get ready for bed.

It might not have seemed like it, but tonight was a success. Would I have liked to have beaten Zach outright and been declared the reigning champion of Fight Night? Sure, but I'd known Zach would be a formidable opponent, and my goal had always been to show that I was equally matched to him—an Heir and the most feared fighter at the Academy.

I accomplished that goal and then some. Zach and I met each other strike for strike, almost like we'd been training together for years, and I'd reveled in the rush of it all. Only Max had ever given me a fight at that level, and he was going to be supremely irritated when I let him know I'd met his match and that it was Zach Ferrero.

I'd even been pleasantly surprised by the small crowd that had gathered to congratulate me on the fight as I'd exited the ring. John Tyler Ashmore had given me a respectful head nod, and of course Raiford had been there to gush over my skills and invite me to some Tier One after-party I'd had no interest in attending. Hannah and Devin had come down from the stands with Mari, and the three of them had walked me back to A Dorm, my small girl group apparently budding under Mari's direction.

The cherry on top of the night had been the stunned, livid look on Lisa's face as I'd passed her on my way out of the gym. She'd just watched me get rough and sweaty with Zach in a way she had only dreamed about, and that alone had been worth the price of admission.

I toweled off, throwing my hair into a loose braid and pulling on the silky tank top and little shorts I'd been sleeping in this week. After a quick text to Max and Dom to confirm all had gone well at the fight, I collapsed into my king-sized bed and prayed sleep took me quickly.

Because if it didn't, I knew I'd be replaying Zach's furious, impassioned words as he held a knife to my throat over and over again until it broke me.



The soft click of my bedroom door opening jolted me awake sometime later.

I surged upright, whipping the small handgun from under my pillow and pointing it at the shadowy figure in the doorway. The ambient light of the City's nightlife that streamed through my window only just illuminated his hulking form.

"Woah, easy, Princess. It's just me."

"Zach?" I mumbled, squinting at him through my bleary vision. "How'd you get in here?"

He chuckled, creeping closer to my bed. "You're not the only one with tricks."

I lowered my gun, setting it on my nightstand with a soft thunk before attempting to rub the sleep from my eyes. It was too trusting, but I was tired, and I knew with a deep-seated certainty I should've questioned but didn't that Zach wasn't here to hurt me.

He approached the side of the bed where I sat with my covers in a disheveled heap around my hips, and I watched wordlessly as he shucked his sweatshirt. Under it, he wore a soft V-neck T-shirt that clung to his muscular chest, and he had on what looked like flannel pajama pants.

"What are you doing?"

He didn’t answer, his dark gaze roving over me as he kicked his shoes off and reached for my covers. He pulled them back before sliding right on into bed with me, scooting me toward the center with his big body and pulling the covers up over us. Then he wrapped himself around me, pressed my face to his chest, and buried his nose in my hair.

I let him do all of this without protest because it felt *so good*.

“I know we’re supposed to be enemies out there, Princess,” he whispered, his warm hand rubbing circles on my back. “But I need to hold you. I missed you so fucking much, and it still doesn’t feel real that you’re here.”

I melted into him, digging my fingers into his soft shirt and breathing in the intoxicating citrus scent of his shampoo that still clung to his damp hair. “I missed you too,” I whispered back. “So much.”

“That’s good, baby girl,” he replied. “I know you hate the Families, and you have every right to. But I couldn’t bear it if you hated me too. Neither could the others.”

I sighed. “I don’t, Zach. I tried, but… I couldn’t.”

He hummed in satisfaction before he tipped my face up to study me with those fierce brown eyes. He cupped my cheek with his big hand, and he skimmed his thumb across the freckles that dotted the skin around my nose.

“Never hide these from me again, Princess,” he murmured, gazing down at me with a reverence that had heat pooling low in my belly. He dipped his head, pressing his lips to the freckles on one side of my face in a soft kiss, then moving to do the same to the other side. The cool metal of his lip ring was a delicious contrast to the warm heat of his lips against my skin, and I bit back a groan of protest as he pulled away to look at me again, that familiar cocky smirk telling me he knew exactly what he was doing to me.

“Why are you still calling me that?” I asked, breathless and at a loss for anything else to say.

“What?”

“You know I’m not really the Southside Princess.”

He frowned. “No, you’re not. As it turns out, you’re the Princess of this entire fucking City. I thought that was obvious.”

“Oh.”

He pressed one last kiss to my nose before tucking me back into his chest. Our bodies intertwined with ease, like we’d been doing this forever, and I let the steady thump of his heartbeat under my cheek lull me back down the path to sleep.

“You’re the most spectacular woman I’ve ever laid eyes on,” he said softly as I began to drift, his words sparking something within me that was dangerously close to igniting beyond my control. “Please don’t ever make me fight you again, baby girl.”

“Okay,” I mumbled. “Night, Zach.”

“Night, Jojo.”



Zach was gone before I woke in the morning. It was just as well because that way, Mari did not catch him sneaking out of my room, which meant I did not have to try to convince her that I, a red-blooded heterosexual American woman, slept next to *that* all night and did nothing but cuddle.

The remainder of the first week of the semester passed without further incident, and I was grateful. The student body as a whole was now pretty wary of me, save the usual core group of Tier One ass-lickers that hated my guts and were desperate for Family approval and/or Heir dick.

Harper flashed her engagement ring in my vicinity as often as possible, and while it irritated me a lot more than it should have, I got some semblance of satisfaction out of the fact that Bennett seemed to pay no more attention to her than he did before their engagement.

He refrained from running his mouth at me in our shared classes or at crew practice, which meant I did not end up having to introduce his nuts to my boot. He still watched me, and I watched him back, and it was all starting to feel like dangerous foreplay before he either tried to fuck me or kill me.

I was pretty sure he didn’t know which one of those things he wanted at any given moment either.

Noah was both sweet and sulky with me during our classroom interactions, and I found myself trying to drag that beautiful smile out of him whenever I could, like I was suddenly an addict jonesing for my next hit.

And if he didn't also stop giving that smile to Annie in my presence, I was going to scratch her eyes out like a feral cat in heat.

I wasn't proud of it.

I didn't know if I was just becoming *that* possessive of my old best friend or if it was because Annie was a sneaky, nasty little cunt who tried to have me assaulted and didn't deserve an ounce of Noah's sunshine.

Either way, that bitch was on borrowed time, and Noah was going to be introduced to my boot, too, if he didn't cut it out. Then he'd really be mad at me.

When I saw Zach around, he was his usual flirtatious self and made no bones about giving me that kind of attention in front of everyone. To the untrained eye, this probably seemed like his normal MO, but I knew better. I could feel the… gravity of it, like there was a thread of sincerity woven into every flirty word.

It didn't help that he made his way into my bed every night for the rest of the week. He'd usually appear well after I'd fallen asleep, and by the third night, I didn't even wake up at the intrusion. I hoped my reflexes—which normally operated on a hair trigger—had just somehow adjusted only to him. We didn't talk much, but I'd feel him press a kiss to my shoulder or the back of my neck before wrapping himself around me and drifting off to sleep.

I slept so deeply with him, feeling as safe and secure as was possible for me, and I dreamed of our childhood without having those happy memories perverted by nightmares.

He was always gone in the morning, and we hadn't talked about what this was, but I found that I didn't exactly care.

I just didn't want it to stop, whatever it was.

But it would, at least for a few days, because I was leaving the Academy on Saturday morning to return home for the long holiday weekend.

"Look at you, slumming it with the working class," Max teased as our sleek commuter train rolled over the bridge from the City to Olde

Town. “I told you I’d happily be your chauffeur if you’d just order that Bugatti I sent to your email.”

I scoffed. “Can you imagine us driving that around the Southside? Parking it in the lot at Dom’s gym? How much more obnoxious could we be?”

He pouted at me. “Fine, continue to not use your exorbitant wealth for anything *cool*.”

“I like the train,” I insisted with a huff. “We agreed it was plenty safe to take public transit as long as you were with me.”

He grinned at me before casting a threatening glance around the train car, pulling one of the three knives he was wearing from his coat and giving it a lazy twirl through his fingers. Most of the half-full car ignored him, but he received more than one wary glance from the few passengers who’d realized they were sharing an enclosed space with a tall, muscular guy with a man bun, a sharp blade, and a menacing smile.

I was armed as well, but we knew the odds of the Families attacking me in broad daylight on public transportation were low. Honestly, it probably would’ve been easier for them to run my hypothetical Bugatti off the road and pretend I’d perished in a car accident, so I would continue to take the train when I could.

Max could deal with it.

We exited the train in Olde Town at the Main Street station, two blocks north of Main in the heart of the business district of the Northside. The winter sky was gray and overcast, and the chilly wind whipped against my exposed face as we hiked the half mile south to Laura’s cheery bookstore and our second-floor apartment. The cold hadn’t kept the usual Saturday crowd from descending on Main Street’s quaint shops and restaurants, and I hoped some of that traffic would flow down to Laura’s before the day was out.

“You’re coming with me to the gym later, right?” Max asked as we ambled down the sidewalk, braced against the wind with our hands shoved in our coat pockets. “Mari sent me video of your badassery at Holywell Fight Night, and I’m pretty sure Dad’s been running choice clips on the gym TVs all week. You’re now a legend.”

“Please, I was already a legend.”

He barked out a laugh as we approached the front of Laura's store. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a nondescript black SUV idling on the curb across the narrow street. My hackles went up two seconds before its doors flew open, and two large men wearing the black tactical uniform of the Family Enforcers exited the vehicle.

I whirled, tearing the two handguns I wore from the shoulder holsters under my long wool coat and raising them high, one hand aimed at each of the men and ready to put a bullet in their heads if they so much as flexed an arm in our direction.

Max was just as fast, his gun now aimed at the thin suited man who'd climbed out of the car right after the Enforcers. That man promptly let out a shriek of alarm, throwing his hands up in an immediate surrender.

"Don't shoot! It's just me, Jolie!" he shouted in a shaky voice.

I squinted, taking in his expensive gray suit, thinning light blond hair, and vaguely familiar gaunt face.

"Uncle Anders?"

CHAPTER TEN

JOLIE



"Yes! I'm sorry to ambush you like this, but I just… I didn't know how to get ahold of you."

I nodded hesitantly, lowering my weapons but darting a glance at Max that said he should stay how he was.

I also tossed a quick look behind me at the doorway of Laura's store. "It's okay, Laura! It's my uncle."

Laura lowered her hunting rifle from her shoulder with a scowl. I agreed with the sentiment—this was a supremely dumb move by Anders, and he was lucky all three of them weren't bleeding out in the street right now.

"Can I… can I come closer?" Anders called with a helpless little wave. "The guys will keep back. I'm just not supposed to go anywhere without them, you know?"

I did know, as all heads of Families and many of the richest Tier Ones never traveled anywhere without personal security. For Anders, it was probably how James Spencer or whoever had the direct line to his security team spied on him.

I nodded again, stepping closer to Max because it made me feel safer. I didn't think my uncle was here to hurt me, but the adrenaline spike of being ambushed in the street in front of my home hadn't receded.

“Oh, my God,” Anders murmured as he came to a stop in front of where I stood on the sidewalk. “It really is you. You look… you look so much like her.” He choked on a sob.

He meant my mother—his sister. I had no pictures of her when she was my age other than what I could find searching for public news stories online, but I was aware that with our unique hair and eye color, I was pretty much her spitting image.

Anders was blond, too, but he had more golden tones in his now graying hair. He was only thirty-six, more than a decade younger than my mom would have been, but he looked much older—the toll having the boot of the Four Families on his neck for seven and a half long years.

“It is me,” I replied, keeping a business tone. “I apologize I haven’t reached out, Uncle. As you know, I’m not currently aligned with the Families.”

“Right,” he said, shaking his head. “I wish you weren’t doing that. I really do—I’m so worried about you! But I’ve… made it known that I desired a meeting with my niece, so I came down here as soon as my team spotted you on the train. We shouldn’t be hassled.” He motioned to the bookstore, where Laura still lingered in the doorway with a watchful eye on us and her phone in hand—no doubt linked up to Dom. “Could we just… talk for a few minutes?”

I looked at Max, whose narrowed gaze hadn’t left the Enforcers still posted up next to the car across the street.

He nodded to me before he eyed Anders with suspicion. “Let’s use Mom’s office. I’m coming—where Jojo goes, I go.”

Anders nodded vigorously. “That’s fine. Lead the way.”

We walked down the short sidewalk to the bookstore’s front door, Max and me in the lead while Anders plodded along behind us.

“Laura, this is my uncle, Anders Nilsson,” I said as we stepped inside where she waited, still looking wary. “Uncle, this is my adoptive mom, Laura Miller.”

Anders’s eyes widened a bit, like he’d forgotten I had a new family. “Oh, yes, wow,” he stammered, grasping Laura’s hand. “Nice to meet you. Thank you for… taking care of my niece.”

“Your niece takes care of herself just fine,” Laura said with a tight smile. “You’d do well not to attempt an unscheduled meeting with her

again."

Damn, Laura was not going to give Anders even an ounce of her Midwestern politeness. Having to get her rifle out in the store did make her grouchy.

"This way."

I led Anders behind the register and down the small hallway to Laura's office while Max brought up the rear after giving his mom a reassuring squeeze. I made myself comfortable behind Laura's small messy desk, motioning for Anders to take a seat in the chair currently overflowing with binders and a few colorful magazines that was the only other place to sit in the cramped little room.

Max took up his sentry post by the door, and I watched as Anders awkwardly found the binders new homes on the floor and the small side table nearby before falling into the chair like his legs just wouldn't hold him anymore. His dull blue eyes darted around the office, taking it in with a look of distaste as he worried absently at the hem of his suit jacket.

I stared at him until he finally met my eyes. He took a deep breath. "I am here first and foremost because I wanted to see you. I'm just so… *astounded* you're alive. I never did know for sure whether the plane crash story was real or not…. I guess I'd always suspected. Kerstin hadn't mentioned a vacation…." He frowned, shaking his head like he was disappointed in himself before he looked at me again. "I'm sorry I never tried to… look harder."

I shrugged. "What could you have done? I know the Families haven't given you any real power. You'd have ended up just as dead as my parents if you'd started sniffing around."

He nodded, looking morose. "Spencer has been on the warpath, Jolie. I'm worried about you."

"I don't need you to worry about me."

He huffed. "Well, I will anyway. Especially if Spencer's right and you have… Jeff's flash drive."

My eyes flashed to Max, who shot me a quizzical eyebrow before returning his intense gaze to the back of Anders's head, like he was trying to see inside of it.

"What about my dad's flash drive?" I replied, feigning nonchalance.

It didn’t take a genius to work out that anything that might have disappeared from James Spencer’s safe was probably in my hands, but the fact that Anders was at all in the loop about its contents was unexpected.

Anders's defeated posture said he did not want to be having this conversation, and he looked at me with what appeared to be a mix of dread and hope. “You do have it, don’t you? You basically announced to the world that you’d broken into his personal safe, and I know that’s where he kept it.”

“Maybe” was all I said.

He sighed. “You have to understand, Jolie. There’s something there he’s desperate for. He hounded me for five straight years after your parents died about finding the encryption key. He thinks that because I worked on Jeff’s team that I would somehow have it or know how to find it. I’ve torn his office and the whole penthouse apart, looking for *anything* that could possibly point me to the key, and I’ve come up empty every time.”

My blood boiled. “I hope you weren’t trying *that* hard to hand over my dad’s most private work to the man that fucking killed him.”

He looked at his feet. “He was threatening me, Jolie. What was I supposed to do?”

“How about grow a pair of fucking balls?” Max muttered from the doorway.

Couldn’t have said it better myself.

Anders flushed, sputtering, “I know you have it in your head you can take on Spencer and the other Families, but you can’t, Jolie. Right now they seem to think you’re just an annoyance, but I’m worried about what they might do to get that drive back.”

“And you have no idea what’s on it?” I asked. We didn’t either because we knew better than to try to break the encryption on a KnightKey500. Our team had taken one look at it and said it was impossible.

He looked at his feet as he shook his head. “It’s clearly something that Spencer really, *really* wants.”

I kept my face neutral even though this was definitely interesting information. We’d assumed James Spencer had a reason for

keeping my dad's flash drive in his personal safe, but we didn't know whether he had the encryption key or if he'd ever accessed it.

A sick feeling hit me right in the stomach. That shiny little drive that was currently tucked in the safe under my bunk had something on it that James Spencer wanted, and I wondered if he'd wanted it enough to murder my entire Family for it.

I met Max's knowing eyes. He knew exactly where my mind had gone, and I gave him a sharp nod.

We would get to the bottom of this.

"I'm not saying you should just hand it over to him," Anders went on. "But I worry for your safety if you don't."

That made me laugh. "Sure, Uncle. Let me just schedule a meeting with Mr. Spencer to give him back the very thing I risked my life to take from him. A thing that does not, under any circumstances, belong to him. It's *mine*."

He looked uneasy. "Okay. I get it. I do. I'll… try to be helpful to you. As much as I can."

That was more like it.

"Thank you. I don't suppose you have any clue at all as to what the Families' claim my dad did that justified what they did to us?"

He was quiet for a long moment. "No. Obviously your, uh, *speech* last month was the first I'd heard about… all of that. I wasn't exactly *privy* to Family business back then."

"Okay, well, if something comes to you, let me know," I replied. "I'll get you set up with our encrypted messaging software so we can communicate without prying eyes."

He blew out a relieved breath. "Really? Wow, yes, that would be amazing."

"And," I added because I had some sense of loyalty to my only living blood relative, "you can let us know if you're ever in real trouble. I don't think you should try to bail out of Knight right now because it will look very suspicious and make you a target, but if something happens… we can try to help you."

He nodded, more perked up now than he'd been since he arrived. "I…. You can do that? Gosh, I hope it doesn't come to that, but I appreciate it more than I can say. It's been… *rough* since you all died."

I didn't correct him because the little girl I'd been up until that night had definitely died. I'd emerged from the Obsidian as something else entirely.

"Okay, well, I don't mean to keep you," he said, standing and smoothing his pressed pants. "It was… really good to see you, Jolie. I'm sorry about… everything."

I stood up. "Me too, Uncle."

Max opened the door and stepped aside, leaving Anders to find his own way out.

He stopped in the doorway to look at me over his shoulder with hopeful eyes. "You'll be in touch?"

"I will."

He nodded again, then disappeared down the hall, presumably headed outside to his babysitters to be driven back to Knight Tower.

I dropped back into Laura's chair, releasing the tension I'd been holding. I was done playing the Knight Heir for now.

Max took over the chair Anders had vacated. "Let me call Zepp," he said, scrolling on his phone before putting it on speaker and tossing it on the desk.

"Goody," I snarked. Zepp was such a little shit, but he was a genius and ran the Shadows' entire tech team with a powdered-sugar-covered fist.

He also taught Max everything he knows.

He answered after two rings.

"Maxy, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Hello, Zepp," I drawled.

"Well, if it isn't our fearless leader," he cooed at me, like a dick. "What can I do for you, boss lady?"

"You can wipe the donut dust off your fingers and tell us if you've had any epiphanies regarding getting into my dad's flash drive without the encryption key."

He snorted. "It's never happening, boss. Your dad was a titan of data security, and that is his premier product. You have to have the key, and if we try to break it, the drive will self-destruct."

We'd been over this. I knew it was futile.

"We've learned that James Spencer never accessed it either," Max added. "And that whatever is on there is something he wanted

enough to harass Anders about for years."

Zepp hummed. "It's not surprising, given where you guys found that thing."

"And there's no clues in what we've been able to access at Knight itself?"

Rapid typing sounded before he replied, "No, not really. We've been snooping around inside the various companies and incubators within the old Knight empire, but there hasn't been anything that seems to have caught the particular interest of James Spencer or any of the other Families." More typing. "Nothing all that revolutionary in all their locked-up IP, either. Shit's gone soft over there without your dad."

That was what happened when your legacy was stolen, stripped for parts, and operated solely to squeeze as much money out of it as possible to line the pockets of the thieves that ran it.

"I guess I'll just have to find my dad's key, then."

"That's the spirit," Zepp chirped, now munching noisily on something. "In the meantime, we're working on our next *project*. Should be ready to push out in the next few weeks."

"Awesome, thanks, Zepp."

"Anything to take out the trash and return the queen to her rightful place."

My rightful place was a cabana on a private island with a livestream of the City in flames on my phone, but the Shadows were ready to build something better on top of the ashes.

They didn't need me.

Zepp signed off, and Max shot me an encouraging smile.

"We'll get it figured out, Jojo. The important thing is, your dad's work is out of Spencer's hands, whatever it is." He drummed his knuckles on the desk before he hopped to his feet. "Let's eat something and then go work your frustrations out on someone's face at the gym."

Now that sounded like a plan.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JOLIE



Dom's gym was abuzz with the usual Saturday afternoon crowd. Located in the heart of the Southside, the gym was a converted warehouse in which Dom had invested every dollar of his savings from his time in the Special Forces, and he'd turned it into a state-of-the-art fitness facility and MMA training center.

The gym was sandwiched between a dilapidated apartment complex and an aging strip mall made up of constantly rotating small businesses trying to survive—currently, a bail bondsman, a paycheck loan center, and a dry cleaner.

Dom had built a place where the Southside's denizens could come channel their anger and frustration into something productive—something beautiful, even. I'd seen many a jaded teen trudge reluctantly through these doors and exit years later a confident, centered member of society.

"Careful," Max goaded me as I slammed a fist into the punching bag we were using to warm up. "That manicure looks expensive."

"Oh, fuck off," I said, laughing. "First of all, this is *dip.* It can handle a little bag work." I threw another two punches into the bag. "Second, you need to come with Mari and me next time because your nails look like shit."

Max made a show of looking at his chipped dark-gray nail polish with a horrified gasp. "You're right. I'll never land a rich sugar mama

or daddy looking like this."

I rolled my eyes. "You're an idiot. You'll be your own sugar daddy when you turn twenty-one and you get access to your trust."

I'd set it up for him as soon as the Knight Foundation had returned my inheritance. I'd also paid off every dollar of debt Dom and Laura carried on the gym, the bookstore, and the mortgage on the apartment. Whatever might happen to me, I'd made sure my family would be taken care of.

Max sighed wistfully. "Then that Bugatti will be mine."

I punched him playfully in the shoulder before we both settled back into our usual routine of fucking around with the bags and stretching. As I folded my body in half to work out my hamstrings, I closed my eyes and took in the familiar sounds of the gym—the clanging of weights being lifted and dropped, the grunts and yells coming from the fighters sparring in the cage and the spectators cheering them on, the whirring of the assault bikes, the hard footfalls on the treadmills—all of it settling over me like a warm blanket.

This was home.

"Hey, Joanna—shit, I mean, *Jolie."*

I looked up to find Matt Jennings leaning against the nearby wall, dressed in a tank top sporting the gym's tiger logo and worn training shorts. His light brown hair flopped across his sweaty forehead, and he crossed his toned arms casually as he gave me a warm smile.

Max snorted from next to me, shifting away to suddenly get really busy going after the bag again, and I made a mental note to throttle him later.

"Hey, Matt," I replied, continuing my stretch. "How have you been?"

"Good," he said, his bright hazel eyes taking me in with an innocent eagerness, which was kind of endearing since this boy had definitely seen me naked. "I mean, still reeling a bit from, well, you know…." He waved a hand at me.

"Ah, yeah, I'll bet," I replied with a wry grin. I'd been half worried I wouldn't be welcomed back at the gym after revealing who I actually was, but honestly, most of the clientele had just rolled with it like it wasn't the weirdest thing they'd seen this year.

"Hey, so, I was wondering—"

The sound of the bell over the front door distracted us both, and more than a few of the patrons stopped what they were doing to stare as an unfamiliar man dressed in a black hoodie and tight gray sweatpants came waltzing through the front door.

He came to a stop in the middle of the gym, turning in a circle to take it all in. As he turned my way, he paused and dropped his hood, revealing the sexy, smirking face of Zach Ferrero.

He headed straight for me, striding confidently through the crowd, his dark eyes alight with mischief.

The whispers started.

"Who's that*?"*

"Oh shit, is that—"

"—Ferrero—"

"—really Zach Ferrero?"

Pictures of the Heirs were very tightly controlled by the Families until they graduated from college and began their careers, so Zach's face wouldn't have been immediately recognizable like his mother's was. But there were enough people in this gym that made a living working security for the City's elite that at least some of them would have seen Zach in person at some point, so by the time he made it to where I stood—gaping at him from my mat—everyone in the gym knew who'd just walked in.

"Hey, Princess," Zach said with a big grin. He placed a possessive hand around the back of my neck and drew me close, dropping a quick kiss on my forehead before releasing me.

Then his eyes snagged on Matt.

Poor Matt, who was still in his spot on the wall and now appeared… frustrated.

Zach narrowed his dark eyes dangerously. "You again? Get lost, dude. She's not for you."

"Zach," I huffed, exasperated, crossing my arms to glare at him.

Matt sighed audibly before he slunk away, defeated once again. I didn't try to stop him because, while I felt shitty about it, since Matt was cute and fucking *nice*, even if we didn't have what I'd call *great* chemistry—Zach was right.

I wasn't for Matt.

Still, I eyeballed Zach suspiciously. "What are you doing here?"

His wicked smile returned, spreading slowly across his handsome face. “I’m sorry, did you think you were sleeping without me tonight?”

My stomach swooped, a warm feeling fizzing through my veins. I was thankful I’d already worked up a flushed, sweaty face or else I might’ve embarrassed myself in front of the whole damn gym.

I reined it in. I was a powerful, independent woman, and I would not be undone by the prospect of *cuddles*. “Presumptuous, Zach. You want to cram into my tiny bunk bed in our little apartment? I’m not sure our accommodations will be up to your standards.”

“That’s right.” Max appeared at my side. He threw his big arm over my shoulder and met Zach’s cocky smirk with one of his own. “Three’s a crowd, Ferrero. Jojo’s already got a bunk buddy.”

Zach’s eye twitched. “I suggest you remove your arm from her, Miller, before I break it. We all know you’re not actually her *cousin*.”

“No, he’s not,” I snapped. “He’s my *brother,* and you’ll treat him with respect. And I’ll be the one to say who does and does not get to touch me, you overbearing ass.”

“He’s just running his mouth, anyway,” Max added with a taunting grin. “Ferrero wishes he could break my arm before I put him underneath me.”

“Yeah? Let’s go, then, you little shit.”

“*Zach*.”

“Fuck yeah,” Max replied, releasing me to step toe to toe with Zach as they really sized each other up, the testosterone level quickly rising to suffocating. They were almost the same damn size—Max was an inch taller, but Zach had several pounds of muscle on him. Max went on, “I owe this dick a beating for how he treated my *sister* last semester.”

“*Max*,” I groaned, but they were off, marching toward the cage in the very center of the gym, the way clearing for them as if everyone knew something big was about to go down.

I scurried after them, excitement at the prospect of watching the two most skilled fighters I’d ever faced go up against each other warring with the dread I felt at the chance that either of them might be hurt.

They were already in the cage—an octagonal fence that bordered a thick, elevated sparring mat—by the time I reached the perimeter, both of them shirtless and eyeing each other with menace. The entire gym had dropped whatever they were doing and surrounded us, the eagerness for bloodshed palpable.

"You ever had a real challenge, Ferrero?" Max taunted him. "How many fights have you won because your opponent was just another Family ass-kisser who didn't want Mommy mad at him for messing up her Heir's pretty face?"

Zach tutted at him. "So mouthy. Runs in the *family*, doesn't it?"

I climbed the few feet necessary to lean over the side of the octagon's fence and hiss, "If either of you maims the other one in any serious way, I will fucking murder you!"

That only made Zach grin like a maniac at Max. "Hear that? She loves me just as much as she loves you."

Max glowered at him. "You haven't earned that, asshole."

"Ugh," I groaned, dropping back down to the floor before I made shit worse.

Dom sidled up next to me. "I suppose there's no stopping this?" He'd abandoned his post at the front desk, and now he watched with a wary look as his son and the Ferrero Heir circled each other.

"Um, no, probably not. Max has had it out for the guys since day one, and Zach has suddenly become a little… territorial."

He eyed me dubiously. "Uh-huh. Do I need to be worried about you?"

I quirked an eyebrow.

"Do I need to be worried about you beyond all the other usual shit I worry about on a daily basis?"

I snorted. "No, Dom. I can handle… attention from a boy."

Usually. This boy, though, was trying to push me… places.

"Right, well, if you need me to clean my Beretta in front of him in an archaic display of paternalistic bullshit, you just let me know."

I grinned at the mental image. "I would, but I've seen Zach hang a guy from a meat hook and put a bullet in his head, so it will probably take a lot more than that to scare him off."

"Fair point."

Then, with a resigned sigh, he climbed into the cage.

“Alright, settle down everyone!” Dom’s voice boomed over the excited chatter surrounding us, and the crowd quieted almost instantly because the boss was talking. “I know this isn’t an official Fight Night, but I’m sure most of you have noticed that we have a special guest today.” He darted a glance at Zach with a look that screamed, “*I’ve got my eye on you*,” and Zach, to his credit, just returned it with a respectful nod. “So, I’m going to just remind everyone of the usual rules and lay down a new one. The fight will end when one person taps out *or* I call a draw. And for today, there will be no filming or pictures allowed, and absolutely no posting anything to social media unless you want to be dealing with the Families wiping your Instagram account from the face of the earth.”

Assenting murmurs and nods all around. Andrea would certainly have a coronary if it was made public that her precious baby was down here, mixing with the working class, and the citizens of the Southside knew better than to fuck around in Family shit.

That was an affliction of the City’s elite.

“Everyone good?” Dom looked around the gym and then at Zach and Max, who both seemed very antsy and also very bloodthirsty, and it made me nervous.

They nodded. Dom strode to the edge of the cage, then shouted. “Fight!”

Without a second’s hesitation, they charged.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JOLIE



It was the best fight I'd ever witnessed.

Zach and Max matched each other punch for punch, kick for kick, block for block. The power and speed on display was breathtaking, and I could see the mutual respect blooming within both of them as the fight progressed, despite the colorful insults they continued to chirp at each other.

"Paralyzed" by The Used pumped through the gym's speakers as they danced around the ring. Max's left eye was swelling and turning purple while blood oozed from a cut on Zach's forehead.

The crowd was wild, cheering and *oooh-ing* when someone got in a particularly great hit. With the raucous atmosphere and the thrill of the fight, I didn't notice two more strange hooded figures slink through the doors and work their way into the crowd until they appeared on either side of me where I was plastered up against the cage fence.

"Well, we found him," Noah said with a sigh, lowering the hood of his gray sweatshirt. His blond hair was mussed, his cheeks flushed from the winter cold, and it was painfully adorable.

"Yep." Bennett's big body loomed next to me, his face shrouded in his own dark hoodie, but I could see his keen eyes taking in Zach and Max as they tangled together again.

I snorted. “Did you two lose your buddy? He wander off without telling Mom and Dad?”

Bennett turned that cool gaze on me, taking in my face in that intense, calculated way of his, before he said, “We *always* know each other’s whereabouts. We keep each other safe. He shouldn’t have left without telling us where he was going.”

It warmed my heart a little to hear how much they still looked out for one another—something I could’ve had with them, maybe, if the Families hadn’t stolen everything from me.

Shoving away the bitterness that clawed at me, I just said, “I hope you didn’t bring the McLaren down here.”

Noah snorted a laugh as Bennett wrinkled his nose in disgust. “God, no. We took a ride share.”

“How pedestrian,” I drawled.

Zach grunted as Max landed a solid kick on his torso, then he retaliated by tackling Max to the ground. They rolled around, fighting for dominance, both of them looking like they were having the time of their lives.

“I take it Zach came looking for you and got… sidetracked?” Noah asked.

“Pretty much.”

“Reckless,” Bennett muttered.

“Understandable,” Noah retorted.

Dom made his way over to me, excitement lighting up his dark-brown eyes. “I’m going to call it,” he said. “What a clinic, though.” Before he turned back, his eyes snagged on my new friends and narrowed in suspicion. “Spencer. Hargraves.”

“Sir,” they both said, giving Dom very respectful nods of acknowledgement.

“Hmm” was all Dom said, and he gave me a pointed look before he waded into the middle of Zach and Max.

My jaw dropped as my wide-eyed stare bounced between Noah and Bennett. “Seriously? You three have said so much ridiculous shit to me, and yet you just gave Dom more respect than I’ve seen you give any other human being.”

Noah gave me a confused look, sincerity shining in those baby blues. “He saved you, didn’t he?”

“Yes. He did.”

Noah nodded, and then said, like it was obvious, “We owe him everything.”

Bennett grunted in agreement, and the bitterness loosened its claws.

“Alright! Time’s up!” Dom yelled, physically yanking Max backwards by his shorts before he could charge at Zach again. “It’s a draw! Great fight, gentlemen.”

The onlookers gave a rousing round of applause before dissipating, everyone headed back to whatever they’d been doing before Zach and Max decided to beat the shit out of each other for our entertainment. The two of them wandered over to where I still stood between Noah and Bennett, Max pulling his shirt on over what appeared to be a substantial bruise forming on his torso while Zach used his to mop up the blood running down his face.

“Did you two get that out of your system?” I asked, scowling.

“Fuck no,” Zach replied, chuckling. “That was the best fight I’ve had besides the one I had with you, except even better because I didn’t want to hit you. I definitely wanted to hit this motherfucker.”

“Anytime, dickhead,” Max retorted, but he was smiling wide. As he went to gather the strands of his long black hair that had escaped their knot during his fight, his eyes landed on Noah. “Oh, hey, what’s up, Nick?” he asked casually.

Noah glowered at him, charming smile nowhere to be found.

Max’s gaze moved to Bennett, and he made a show of eyeing him up and down like he was a juicy, delicious piece of meat. He purred, “And… *Spencer*. How’s it going, big man?”

I sighed. My brother’s every interaction with my ex-best friends was just an exciting delight.

“Hilarious,” Bennett intoned, finally losing his hood to give Max his pissiest look. “Apparently Zach failed to teach you not to run your mouth at us.”

“Bennett, goddamn it,” I groaned as Max’s eyes lit up.

“Let’s fucking go, then, big boy,” he said, jerking his head back toward the center of the empty cage. “I’ll happily put you arrogant fuckers in your place all day long, especially if you’re going to come down here to *my* turf to harass *my* sister.”

“Nobody is harassing—”

“She’s not your *sister*—”

Apparently Max was somehow the secret sauce to Bennett losing his usual unflappable mien, because he ignored Zach and Noah’s protests and just bounded right over the fence, stalking to the center of the ring and tossing his sweatshirt aside to reveal his usual long-sleeved crew T-shirt. My hopes of finally seeing him shirtless were dashed when he angrily shoved his sleeves to his elbows, glaring at a giddy Max.

“Nope.” I hopped over the side and into the cage, pulling a Dom and grabbing Max by his shorts before he could bounce back into the ring. “You’re tired, and I will not watch you take any more hits today. Also, take a break from stirring shit with them, please.”

Max stuck his lower lip out at me in a dramatic pout. “But *Jojo*, I wanna play with Spencer.”

“Too bad.” I shoved him back toward the side where Noah and Zach now stood out on the floor, whispering to each other as they looked on. I turned to face Bennett. “He’s mine.”

“Jojo, what—”

“Not a good idea, Princess—”

“Jolie! Come *on*—”

I ignored them all and charged at Bennett, taking his surprised ass right to the ground.

We hit the floor hard, and I rolled us, scrambling on top of him as he got his bearings. I jammed my knee in his gut as he blocked a punch I’d aimed at his pretty face, and then he threw me off of him in a practiced move that told me he was no slouch in the ring.

“Stop. Fighting. Me,” he growled, getting to his feet to face me as I did the same.

“Never,” I retorted in a harsh whisper.

Some of the crowd had trickled back over now that Bennett Spencer was in the cage, their whistles and shouts egging us on.

“Yeah, kick his ass, Jojo!”

“The Southside Heir’s gonna fuck you up, Spencer!”

Stifling a laugh, I dove at him again, and he fought me back to the ground, throwing his big body on top of me. He barked at me again, “Stop it, Jolie. Do not make me hurt you.”

I bared my teeth at him like an animal. “I’ll never just fucking roll over for you, Bennett.”

“I’m not telling you to roll over. I’m telling you to stop fucking starting shit you can’t finish!”

“I’ll fucking finish *everything* I start, asshole,” I hissed, rolling us again so that I was on top, straddling his hot, hard body. “Get it through your thick skull.”

He tossed me off, reversing our positions and slamming me down onto my back, and he gripped my throat in a firm, possessive hold with his big hand. He leaned in, his lips inches from mine and his body vibrating with tension.

“Stop trying to make an enemy of me,” he rumbled. “Of *us*. It shouldn’t fucking be this way, Jolie. You know it. *Give it up*.”

I let out a scream of rage. “Fuck you, Bennett!” I tore his hand from my throat and wrapped my legs around him, flipping us again so I could take my frustration out on his body with my fists, but I was thwarted when I was unceremoniously hauled off him and into strong arms.

“That’s enough of that,” Zach said before passing me to Max. Zach then pulled a seething Bennett off the ground and promptly jammed a hand into his chest to stop him from stalking over to me, presumably to continue his lecture. “Cool it, dude. We get it. You two still have some shit to work through.”

Noah joined us, yanking me away from Max and into his own arms to look me over with a concerned frown.

“He didn’t get you anywhere, did he?”

“He wishes,” I spat.

“No, he doesn’t,” Noah snapped back. “Stop thinking the worst of us, sweetheart. *Please*.”

“Hey, you five!” Dom had returned to yell at us through the fence wire. “You’re done for the day. Head home and stop distracting my patrons.”

“Yes, sir,” Bennett replied, wiping his brow. “We apologize for the… spectacle.”

I turned to once again gape at him incredulously. “What the fuck?”

It was Dom's turn to smirk at me, like he was enjoying the fact that the Heirs of the Four Families were treating him like a man they cared to impress. "I'll see you guys later. *All* of you, I'm sure."

Then he moved on, headed to the other side of the gym to check in with one of his trainers.

Max chuckled. "Well, peace out, assholes. Unless you want to hop on the bus with us back to Olde Town?"

"Fuck no," Zach replied, pulling his keys from the pocket of the sweatpants he'd managed to pull back on after his fight, hiding those shapely, muscular legs—to the disappointment of every person in this gym attracted to men. "I'll drive."

"You parked the *Ferrari* out there?" I asked. It would stick out like a sore fucking thumb in this neighborhood.

"Shotgun!" Max shouted, bolting for the door.

Zach threw his arm around my shoulders. "The car's fine. Let me drop you and Maxy boy at your house before I run these assholes back to the Academy. Then I'll be back in time to tuck you in."

Noah stuck close to my other side as we walked toward the gym's entrance, Bennett trailing along behind us as he pulled his sweatshirt back on.

Noah said, "Zach, if the Families catch you down here, Andrea will start asking questions."

"Fucking let her."



"I can't believe this is where you've been living all this time."

Noah sighed, gazing out the window of Zach's car as Zach drove us up Southside's main drag toward Olde Town and our apartment. We'd just driven under an overpass that housed the largest population of homeless in the City, the dusty tents growing in number every year. We passed several more rundown strip malls, my favorite little Cuban restaurant, and the one free clinic that served the entire Southside population.

Because of Max's rude but valid shotgun declaration, I was stuffed into the Ferrari's tiny back seat, sandwiched in between Noah

and Bennett. Their bodies were pressed up against mine from thigh to shoulder, and I was trying very hard not to enjoy it as I battled the memories of how we used to watch movies all piled together like this in Bennett's media room.

They both studied our surroundings through their respective windows as we drove along the pothole-riddled street, Zach griping every thirty seconds about what it was doing to his suspension.

"Yes, this is where I've been living," I said to Noah. "Max and I took the City bus daily to school about a mile from here, and we also spent a whole lot of time down at Dom's gym."

"First time visiting the Southside, rich boys?" Max quipped as Zach slapped his hand away from where he was fucking with the music selection.

"Obviously," Bennett replied dryly.

"It's… worse than I thought it would be," Noah muttered.

I barked out a laugh. "How'd you think the working class lived? Everyone down here is stuck in the hamster wheel of working themselves to the bone for the City's ruling class and taking whatever scraps they're given. There's no upward mobility for these people unless they manage a scholarship to Holywell or escape the City altogether."

"And yet," Zach said as we entered Olde Town, the old, deteriorating apartments that lined the roads suddenly turning into cuter, if not still a little rundown, rowhouses on cobblestone streets. "Princess lives two blocks south of Main Street above a happy little bookstore. I find it hilarious that the entire school called Joanna Miller 'slum trash' for a whole semester, and not once did she note that she was actually *extremely* middle class."

That irony had not been lost on me, either, but I'd had no interest in getting into arguments with Chad or fucking Harper about exactly what part of the Southside I hailed from.

"Dom and Laura are a few of the lucky ones," I replied as Zach pulled to a stop in front of Laura's store. "And I had other priorities beyond correcting a bunch of hateful assholes' assumptions about me."

Bennett bristled, not enjoying the reminder of what I'd been up to last semester. "Those assumptions were exactly what you wanted

them to be, Jolie. Let's not pretend otherwise."

I shrugged. "You got me there, Bennett."

"A ridiculous and unnecessary charade," Noah added, glancing at me with a pouty lower lip that I wanted to… bite a little bit.

"I am sensing two out of three ex-best friends remain in the butt-hurt zone," Max announced, turning to grin at me like an asshole. "You boys mad you got outplayed by that sweet little girl you used to know?"

All three of them glared at Max with palpable loathing before the passenger-side door suddenly popped open. "Get the fuck out, man," Zach barked at Max, who just chuckled like a dick before unfolding himself from the front seat of the car.

Zach twisted around to look at me in the backseat, his smirk returning. "I'll be back later, Jojo. Save room for me in your little bunk bed."

Maybe, Zach.

I crawled over Bennett's lap to exit the car, enjoying his tension as I scooted my yoga-pants-covered ass right across his solid thighs while he sat still as a statue. My feet hit the concrete sidewalk, and I turned to brace my hands against the roof of the car, leaning down to give the three of them a stern look.

"Whatever you guys are feeling about me, you need to get over your shit with Max. He's my brother and the most important person in my life."

"That's the problem, Princess," Zach replied, and I frowned at his serious tone.

"What is?"

"He got to have you for these last seven years, and we didn't," Noah said quietly. "Kinda hard not to hate him for it."

"I…. Oh."

I looked at Bennett, who said nothing but met my eyes with his usual intensity.

Or was that… *longing*?

I sighed. I didn't have anything else to say. The Families had stolen a hell of a lot from us.

"Bye, guys. Hope you enjoyed seeing how the other half lives."

I slammed the door closed and watched them pull away, the sinking in my stomach at the loss of them irking me. It felt oddly… *normal* having them here with me in *my* space, like it would've been no big thing for all three of them to have followed me up to our apartment and piled on the couch with me while we watched a stupid movie together.

Shaking my head, I shoved that fantasy away. Zach might come back down here to snuggle me in my tiny bed—a thing I was slowly becoming addicted to—but that didn't mean we were *us* again.

I had to keep my head. There was work to do.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BENNETT



I'd been stupid to think I was going to get all the way through a three-day weekend hunkered down at the Academy without having to deal with my father.

I'd almost made it. Throwing myself into my homework, rowing in the gym until my legs felt like they were going to fall off, stewing over Jolie, being pissy about Zach's nightly absences and expending considerable energy convincing myself my anger was for the *right* reasons—all of these things had made the long weekend fly by.

But it was now late Monday afternoon, and I wore my newest bespoke navy suit as I made my way to Spencer Tower after being summoned there. I sat in the plush back seat of the town car sent by my father to pick me up, my arm draped lazily across the back of the seat like I wasn't fuming as I messaged the guys via our secure chat.

Me: Summoned to ST, will check in when I know more

Noah: Got it, keep us updated

Zach: Don't take his shit

If only it was that easy, Zach.

The silvery-blue glass of Spencer Tower glowed eerily in the waning winter daylight as the car pulled up to the entrance. I exited quickly and stalked through the opulent lobby to the private elevator that accessed our penthouse. A swipe of my—newly recoded—key fob across the elevator's sensor panel, and I was on my way home.

Home. A place I'd hated since my best friend died and took our happy childhood with her.

The elevator doors opened on the sixty-fifth floor, and I strode into the foyer, my dress shoes squeaking on the marble tile that had clearly just been polished by our army of housekeepers. I headed straight for the stairs, certain my father was in his second-floor office, but the bouncing lights and low murmurs of the TV in the living room caught my attention.

I veered that way, finding my mother curled up on the couch under a cashmere blanket as she watched one of her reality shows on the enormous flat-screen mounted on the wall. She wore her favorite turquoise silk robe and clutched a mostly empty wineglass in her delicate fingers. Her freshly highlighted blonde hair hung limp around her shoulders, and the placid look on her face told me she'd taken her pills tonight.

"Everything okay, Mom?" I asked, stopping to place my hands on the back of the plush leather chair next to the couch as I looked her over.

"Oh, hey, honey," she said, giving me a soft smile. "I didn't know you were coming home tonight."

"Father needed to see me."

She nodded. "Must be important. *Everyone's* here." She tried to roll her eyes like she was kidding, but she didn't quite pull it off, the frown that tugged at her lips giving the game away.

Goddamn him.

I moved to her side and dropped a kiss on the top of her head, then I whispered, "I'm sorry, Mom."

"It's okay, baby. Better go see what he wants."

I left her to her show and marched upstairs.

At the top of the stairs, I absently swiped my finger across the small divot in the white wall where one of the many bullet holes from the rounds Frankie had fired at Jolie had been repaired. It had become a habit when I walked these halls, touching the little indentions in the walls and reminding myself how close I'd come to losing her again.

It drove home how important it was to keep her from bringing the entire brutal apparatus of the Families down on her head so I didn't

lose her for good.

I heard a tinkling giggle from the end of the hallway. Resisting the urge to groan and stomp away in the opposite direction, I made my way to the door to Father's study and walked in without knocking.

As expected, Elise was here, "working" into the evening with my father. Less expected was finding her perched on his lap behind his desk, her silky blouse unbuttoned even lower than her usual and her long, red-taloned fingers clutching a nearly empty crystal tumbler from the antique bar cart in the corner of the study.

My father appeared to be working, despite the fact that his private secretary was in his fucking lap, engrossed in whatever was on his laptop screen and not bothering to look up at my entrance.

"Father," I said curtly before looking at Elise, not bothering to hide my revulsion. "Elise, please refrain from fucking my father while my mother is downstairs. We expect Spencer Family employees at your level to exhibit at least *some* class."

"Bennett," Father growled as Elise stood up, smoothing her tight skirt and holding her head high as she made her way around to the front of Father's desk.

She leaned up against it, crossing her arms and giving me a coy little smile.

"It's okay, James," she cooed at him, still staring right at me. "Bennett is just being dramatic—he knows I was only trying to help you look through the contract you just received from Hendrickson." She winked at me. "Two sets of eyes are better than one, especially this late in the afternoon."

Zach's voice popped into my head, the desire to call her a *desperate, social-climbing whore* welling within me, but I'd become a master at keeping a cool head around my father. I wouldn't start slipping now.

"You wanted to see me, Father?" I said, bored and now ignoring Elise.

He finally deigned to look at me, his cold brown eyes taking my measure as usual. He'd taken to issuing demands at me from behind a desk whenever possible, as I now towered over his six-foot height at my six-foot-four. I knew it bothered him.

He was pushing fifty but didn't look it—his daily regimen with his trainer and his strict diet keeping him fit and youthful. The graying of his dark-brown hair only made him look distinguished, and to the untrained eye, he radiated that cool confidence of a successful man, one of the masters of the universe that exemplified the American dream.

Except these glimpses behind the curtain I'd been increasingly allowed had given me a view of what he really was—a cruel and merciless man who cared about power, money, and little else.

His voice was hard when he spoke. "I need you to head over to the emergency board meeting that will have just convened at Alastia. All of this nonsense with your little resurrected friend has them scared, and my sources tell me they are about to vote to separate completely from Spencer." He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms and hitting me with his most serious glare. "This cannot happen. You'll be there to ensure that it does not."

Fuck. Alastia was one of Spencer's most profitable partners, and they were involved in all manner of money-making enterprises—both above board and not. If they cut ties, it would be a huge hit to Spencer, and it would leave them open to being snatched up by *other* companies suddenly flush with cash and looking to stick it to my father.

"I see," I replied. "I take it you have a conflict on your calendar that prevents you from going to issue threats to our friends in person?"

He banged his fist on his desk. "You want to start preparing to walk in my shoes, son? You'll do what I say and step up for this Family without questions or backtalk."

Elise produced a file folder from somewhere on Father's desk, leaning forward to hand it to me while giving me an unobstructed view down the front of her blouse. "Here you go, sweetie. Review it on the ride over."

I grabbed the folder and tucked it under my arm, then I turned my back on both of them, ready to get the fuck out of here and get this over with.

"And Bennett," Father said, suddenly quiet—his most frightening tone. "If that little bitch gets her hands on Alastia or anything else we

value, it will be on you. And if I have to take over dealing with her, I don't think you'll like my methods."

Ice shot through my veins. I paused at the door, taking two deep, calming breaths before turning back to face him. "I was wondering, Father, if you could shed some light on exactly how Jeffrey Knight betrayed the Families." I kept the heaviness from my words as best I could manage after he'd threatened Jolie's life in front of me in a way that said he knew I cared when I shouldn't have. "It would help me convince her that her little revenge scheme isn't as righteous as she thinks it is."

He chuckled, Elise joining him, and it made me want to put my fist through the wall. "That's confidential information, son. Only Peter, Andrea, and I know, and it would be the same for you if either of your little buddies ever went behind your back like that. Focus on your duty to Spencer and the institution of the Four Families. Nothing else matters."

Right.

With a curt nod, I turned away again and marched out the door, slamming it behind me a little harder than necessary.



"Ladies and gentlemen, think about what I said. I suggest you table this vote, or better yet—cancel it altogether."

I rose from the seat I'd commandeered at the head of the conference table in the glass-walled fishbowl of Alastia's offices. The group of ten board members remained seated, now seething over the detailed threats I'd just issued on behalf of Spencer, the gist of which amounted to: go through with this, and we'll ruin you—personally.

The CEO of Alastia, a balding middle-aged man with beady eyes named George Layne, barked at me through clenched teeth, "You tell your father, *boy*, that he doesn't scare us."

I smoothed my lapels. The look on the board members' faces told me they were most certainly scared.

“We’ll be in touch,” I said, and I strode from the room, followed by the two Spencer Enforcers who’d accompanied me on this little trip.

We’d just stepped foot in the parking garage when the hair rose on the back of my neck. Something *off* in the air sent a shot of adrenaline through my body.

“Get down!” I shouted just as a bullet flew straight into the head of one of my bodyguards, dropping him instantly to the dank, cold floor.

I hit the ground and rolled behind the black SUV parked nearest to me, pulling my handgun from under my suit jacket and returning fire.

“Sir, stay down!” the surviving Enforcer shouted at me from his unfortunate spot behind a metal trashcan across the way.

I’d depressed the emergency button on the device I wore on my wrist disguised as a simple Rolex, which meant I just had to avoid getting shot or grabbed until help arrived.

Half a dozen goons dressed in black scurried like ants into my field of vision, most of them firing toward the trashcan where the Enforcer engaged them in what was likely to be a losing battle.

Two began looking for me as they crept around the nearby cars. I’d slipped through the shadows and was no longer behind the black SUV where they’d probably seen me dive, and I waited, deathly silent, as they searched.

I heard my Enforcer run out of ammo in one pistol and switch to another. The sounds of the ensuing gun battle were deafening, and it allowed me to move when I needed to without being detected.

“Where the fuck is that little asshole?”

“He has to be in here somewhere, man. Keep it in your pants, though. They said two mil if we get him alive. The payout’s less than half if he’s dead.”

Contract mercs. Alastia had the money and the connections for it, and I’d bet my trust fund that George Layne had hit the panic button before I’d even shut the door to the conference room.

More gunshots sounded. My Enforcer had managed to drop two of the group, leaving two still firing bullets in his direction and the two sneaking around looking for me.

I'd made it further down the garage, out of range in this low light for the two shooting at my guy, so I just had to occupy the other two for a few more minutes.

"Hey, I think I see—"

I fired two shots from my spot behind a silver Mercedes sedan.

"Fuck!" the guy shouted as he took one shot to his Kevlar vest and another to his shoulder. "He's behind that one!"

They rushed the car, and I popped up from my crouch to knock away the injured man's gun while firing at the other, causing him to duck out of the way and retreat.

Adrenaline fueling me, I advanced on the injured one, landing a solid kick to his stomach and avoiding his swinging arms as I continued to haphazardly fire at the other one, keeping him clear.

"What the fuck kind of rich kid—"

He managed to clip me hard across my cheekbone right before I slammed my fist into his face. He flew backwards just as the loud screeching of tires announced the arrival of Zach's Ferrari.

As it came flying around the corner, Noah leaned out of the passenger-side window and fired two expert shots into the heads of both of my assailants—an impressive feat in the dim lighting—dropping them to the dusty floor like the trash they were. Zach threw open the driver's side door, and I dove inside the still-moving car.

"There's two more up ahead, firing on my Enforcer," I said, panting and splayed out in the cramped backseat.

"They're running this way," Zach announced, speeding toward the elevators. "I don't think your guy made it."

"I got 'em," Noah barked.

Zach whipped the Ferrari into a skid, bringing us perpendicular to the path of the two remaining mercs as they sprinted toward us. Before they could get their shots off, Noah took aim from his window again, gripping his handgun with an easy calm. He fired two shots, and the men fell.

"They're down. Go!"

Zach drove like a demon around the winding floors of the garage and out into the brightly lit City streets. We blew past Ferrero Tower, taking a convoluted route, but eventually we'd be headed for the

waterfront and the main thoroughfare that would take us back to the Academy.

I sat up in the backseat, shucking my now ruined suit jacket, tie, and dress shirt, desperately needing to get the grit of dirt and the stench of blood off my skin. My face throbbed where I'd taken a hit.

"So, I guess your meeting didn't go well?" Zach said, tossing me a smirk in the rearview mirror.

"The board members were ready to fold, but I think the CEO decided he was going to be the next big man who stood up to the Families and 'saved' his company."

"Ransom or kill order?" Noah asked.

"Both. Higher payout for capturing me alive."

They both nodded. Every power player thought they would be the ones to bring a Family to their knees when they pulled this shit, and all they did was sign their death warrant.

"You going to update Daddy Spencer, or do you want to take this one in-house?" Zach asked.

I sighed. "I don't want to add anything else to our plate, but I also don't feel like listening to my father berate me over allowing the Family to be disrespected like this. It'll be my fault, as usual."

And deep down, I felt that kernel of shame. After all, I'd stood for Spencer in front of a room of powerful people and somehow allowed them to think we could be so vulnerable.

"We'll deal with it, Bennett," Noah said, resolute. "None of this is your fault."

He was right, of course, and I tamped down the self-loathing—at least until the next fuckup inevitably landed in my lap.

When it was clear we weren't being followed, Zach slowed the car, and we drove at a leisurely pace along the waterfront. I stared out the window, taking in the river's black, glassy surface that now only made me think of Jolie.

As if it had the same effect on him, Zach let out a wistful sigh. "I'm going to be late to Princess's bed tonight. This little excursion interrupted my Econ homework."

My mood soured further.

"Are you fucking her?" I said through clenched teeth. We didn't have secrets between us, but Zach had been a sneaky little bitch

about Jolie, and after the events of tonight, I didn't have any patience left.

Out with it, asshole.

He glared at me in the rearview mirror as Noah shifted uncomfortably in the passenger seat.

"First of all, that's rich coming from *you*, Mr. Secret-Fingerbang-in-the-Shower."

Heat rose to the back of my neck, but I wasn't going to apologize. That moment belonged to *me*.

"Second," he went on, "No, I'm not fucking her. I haven't even *kissed* her. That's not what this is about."

Noah and I both shot him the world's most skeptical looks.

"Fine—that's not what this is *primarily* about," he amended, growing irritated. "I just… hold her. I want her to feel safe with me. I'm keeping her nightmares away, and I'm trying to earn her trust. You two need to get on board before you lose your chance with her."

"I'm not sure how there can be any trust between us when she keeps us in the dark, and we're just sitting around, waiting for her to move against us," Noah muttered.

"And then what, Zach?" I asked. "What's your plan here? You want her to what, be our girlfriend? All three of us?"

"Uh, yeah," he replied, rolling his eyes. "Unless you're both going to sit here and tell me you have no feelings for her beyond just our platonic friendship of old?"

Deafening silence filled the car.

"That's what I thought. Since we could never allow our feelings for her to come between us like that, it's either *all* of us are with her, or none of us are. And I don't know about you guys, but I don't intend to sit around and watch while she dates doe-eyed Southside waiters or smarmy fucks like Raiford Montgomery right in front of us."

That thought made me want to stab someone, but I was not about to admit it.

"I do… want her back with us," Noah said carefully. "But I don't know, Zach. I think you're moving too fast."

"And it'll be your funeral," I added. "When she strings you up by your balls from Ferrero Tower as a message to Andrea, I'll be here to say I told you so."

He shrugged, not deterred in the slightest. “I’m planning a gift for her to prove my feelings. Frankie’s helping me out.”

God, my head hurt.

“Will you just… be careful?” Noah said, sounding resigned. “I don’t think she necessarily has it out for the three of us. But if we start getting too close, we could end up painting a bigger target on her back if our parents think we’ve switched teams.”

“My father already threatened her once tonight,” I added quietly. “We should be sending her far, far away from here.”

Noah slumped in his seat while Zach gripped the steering wheel so hard, his knuckles practically glowed in the darkness. We were silent the rest of the way back to the Academy.

It was only the beginning of the second week of the semester, and I wondered what other fresh hell awaited us.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JOLIE



My alarm blared on my dorm nightstand at five in the morning, and I groaned into my pillow. Why had I decided to start going back to my morning workout schedule? Did I not already have enough shit to do? My big bed was so comfy—shouldn't I just live here forever?

"Goddamn, Princess. Turn that shit off and go back to sleep."

Strong arms wrapped around me, pulling my back into a hard chest, and I sighed happily. "Why don't you get your ass up and come to the gym with me? It got lonely in there when you guys stopped haunting my morning workouts last semester."

Zach groaned into the back of my neck before his teeth nipped at the skin there. I shivered, and I knew he felt it, because he let out a pleased little hum. "I was out late last night, and I'm fucking beat, baby."

It had definitely been late when Zach finally slipped into my bed. I tried never to wait up for him because I refused to be the girl who sat there, twiddling her thumbs, then crumbled under the disappointment if he didn't show. But he'd been here consistently since the night of our fight—even the two nights I slept at home in my bunk.

That had been… interesting. He'd arrived around bedtime both nights, was exceedingly charming to Laura and Dom—who had both blessedly refrained from acting like anything was weird about the

Ferrero Heir coming over to sleep in my bed—and then Zach and Max would snark at each other before he climbed into my bunk and wrapped himself around me like I was his teddy bear.

We'd both slept peacefully all night long, even smashed together in my tiny bed, and then he'd been gone by sunrise after a kiss to my cheek.

I still didn't know what the fuck was going on. I was getting close to demanding an answer, but I was also worried I'd spook him, and he'd disappear like it'd never happened.

A coward, Jolie Knight. You are a coward.

"Okay, Sleeping Beauty," I said, rolling over to face him, my head now cradled by his tattooed bicep. "Release me. You can stay here and snuggle my pillow while I'm gone."

He chuckled, the sound heavy with sleep. "Just like old times, isn't it? Except you used to shriek at me like a tiny banshee if I crowded you too much when we all slept together on the floor. Now, you always manage to find your way back into my arms."

My heart warmed at the memory of our slumber parties—such a foreign feeling, since I'd long ago stopped reminiscing about my childhood with the guys because it hurt too much.

I reached up and ran my fingers through his sleep-tousled black hair, peering into the bottomless depths of his deep brown eyes. Feeling bold, I closed the inches of distance between our faces to nuzzle his nose with mine, then I pressed a soft kiss to his rough cheek.

"Princess," he rumbled, and it reverberated all the way down to my toes. "You are about to snap my control. It's already hanging by a thread."

"Is it?" I whispered innocently. "And here I thought you only wanted to cuddle with me."

He gave me a dark look, the outline of his stunning face just visible in the low light of my bedroom. He moved his hand from where it had been lightly caressing my back, dipping lower to roughly grasp my hip as he pulled my pelvis flush against his.

His hard dick greeted me, straining against his pajama pants, and I gasped, stifling a moan.

“I want *everything* with you,” he whispered against my ear. “But first, I want to make sure you know how serious I am. I want to prove myself to you. I want you to trust me.” He traced the shell of my ear with his tongue, and my panties went from damp to soaking. “And *when* I fuck you, I want you to be ready. I want you *begging*, because once it happens, baby girl, there is no going back.”

A tiny, desperate whimper escaped me.

“That’s good, Princess,” he purred. “I’ll let you think about that for a while.”

He dropped a chaste kiss to my hair before untangling his limbs from mine and crawling out of bed. He grabbed his phone from the nightstand and shoved it into his pocket before he crept toward my bedroom door.

“See you in class, Jojo.”

He disappeared, presumably to sneak back upstairs into his own bed, and I was left to suffer through my workout with the worst case of blue lady balls anyone had ever experienced in human history.



“So, he… came to your house. To *Dom’s* house. And slept in your bunk bed with you. With Max in the room.”

I stared at Mari over the top of my coffee cup. “Yes.”

“And he’s been sneaking into our dorm every night for a week.”

“Yep.”

“And you’ve been sleeping in the same bed as that boy—who oozes so much sex through every pore in his body that it could almost make *me* consider dabbling in dick—and you have not had one single orgasm.”

None of these were questions. Just stated facts.

“We used to sleep together all the time,” I offered.

“When you were *children*,” she retorted.

I took a bite of my eggs. “Things are… complicated with him.”

She placed her spoon gently down on the table, then she took a calming breath, steepling her fingers under her chin and pinning me with a patronizing look.

“Chica, do we need to have a sex talk? I do not have personal experience with a penis attached to an actual male, but the mechanics are easy enough to explain.”

“Mari—”

“Let him take care of you. Release all this tension you’re carrying around. I worry you’re neglecting your needs.”

I snorted. “I’m good, I promise. It hasn’t been *that* long.”

It kinda had been, but there was no way Zach could ever be just a dick to ride to break my dry spell. I had too many feelings, and we had too much history.

And he was still the son of the woman who’d killed my mother.

Mari huffed at me, her perfectly sculpted eyebrow arched in a way that said she wasn’t buying what I was trying to sell her.

Time to redirect. “How’s Carmen?”

She deflated. “She’s good. Perfect. I miss her.”

I drummed my fingers on the table, debating how much to say. “Mari, I know you have some idea what I’m up to as far as taking back my Family’s empire. I know it sounds a little… ambitious, but I’m confident I can do it. And you have a place with me. With Knight.” I paused, letting that sink in. She swallowed, nodding at me to continue. “So, if you want to wash your hands of Anzaldua, leave Holywell, and go back to Spain to finish college and be with your girlfriend, I’ll support you.”

I’d buy her a villa in Málaga where she could live with Carmen, and then I’d let them watch as I tore the Anzalduas and their regressive bullshit from their golden tower, if that was what Mari wanted.

“I… I don’t know,” she replied in a low whisper. “I love Carmen, and I hate that I’m forced to be here. But I don’t want to leave you either. Not yet.”

That hit me hard. I wasn’t sure I’d really earned that kind of loyalty from Mari, but maybe it was time I tried.

The sound of plates dropping onto the table next to us ended our discussion before I could respond. Hannah, Devin, Hannah’s friend Nick Ruiz, and John Tyler all filled in the seats around us. Raiford beamed a smile in my direction as he passed by, running a hand

through his coiffed hair and flexing a bicep as he took the seat next to Nick.

Not even a little bit tempting, buddy, but go on.

I looked across the aisle. The Heirs were absent from the dining hall this morning, so I guessed it was more than just Zach who'd had a late night. Annie caught my stare and gave me her most hateful scowl, while Lisa rolled her eyes at me and laughed with her buddies like I was the butt of a joke being told right then. Harper eyed me with a smug look before waving her ring at the crowd of tittering Tier Two girls standing in the aisle.

I was getting tired of those three.

My phone buzzed against the table. A quick look at the screen told me a new private chat had been successfully added to our secure server.

I typed a quick message.

Me: All good, Uncle A?

After a minute, his response appeared.

Anders: Yes, thank you. You're sure they can't access this chat?

Me: I'm sure

Anders: Wow, that's great. Thank you again.

Me: Just let us know if you find out anything interesting or get into trouble

Anders: *thumbs up emoji*

When I arrived to Economics, my first class of the day, I was greeted by a smirking Zach, who took the time to look me up and down with heated eyes as I climbed the stairs to my seat. I wore a *skirt* today, specifically to fuck with him after he'd wound me up this morning, and it appeared to be doing its job.

I moved into the row in front of Zach, planning to sit where he could stare at my long legs in my thin black tights and think about what he'd done, when my gaze snagged on Bennett.

He was seated on the other side of Zach, looking tired and bored and sporting a vicious darkening bruise that marred his perfect cheekbone.

Something took over my body—a beast snarling inside me, a demonic possession, *something*—because I was in front of him in an instant.

“Who did that to you?” I asked in a low, angry whisper.

Zach’s eyes widened in shock before a slow pleased smile spread across his face. Bennett just frowned at me in confusion.

“I’m fine, Jolie,” he said, terse and dismissive as usual.

I stepped as close to the front of his desk as I could, leaning down and getting into his space. “Who, Bennett? What the *fuck* happened?”

He sighed. “Not here. After class.”

“Fine.”

I stalked back to my intended seat, then I watched the clock for fifty long minutes, trying to figure out what the hell had gotten into me.



By the time class had ended and I’d made it out into the hallway to watch like a hawk as Bennett and Zach exit the classroom, I’d come to my senses.

Bennett had probably been training with Zach or something and had gotten popped like we all did when we sparred. Just because I’d never seen him with a visible injury before didn’t mean something terrible had happened to him.

And really, Bennett probably needed to get nailed in the face every now and then to keep him humble.

The two of them exited the classroom, Zach still looking amused and Bennett exuding his usual cool intensity, and I fell in step next to them as they headed up the stairs to the top floor of Holywell Hall. We entered the quiet administration wing and stopped in front of a door I recognized.

Bennett keyed the code into the panel on Noah’s office door from memory, and after the lock disengaged with a quiet beep, he shoved open the door and flicked on the light.

We filed in, Zach taking up a casual slouch against the wall while I parked my butt on top of Noah’s desk. I leaned back onto my hands and crossed my legs, my skirt riding up my thighs with the

movement. I bounced my leather-booted foot as I waited for my answers.

Bennett shut the door behind us, then turned to face me, crossing his arms and staring down at me. His gaze dropped to my legs, and his jaw tensed. “What the fuck are you wearing? You hate skirts and dresses.”

“I like it,” Zach chimed in from the wall. He wasn’t even pretending not to stare at my legs.

I couldn’t help but grin at Bennett even though he was being a dick. Little Jojo Knight had been such a tomboy, and it pleased me he was thinking of her.

“Bennett,” I said, the picture of patience. “Your face.”

“You sure about this, man?” Zach asked.

“Yes, I—”

The door opened. “What’s going on in here?”

Noah waltzed in, looking dapper today in his navy vest and bow tie. After a nice long look at my legs, he made his way around his desk, tossing his leather messenger bag on its surface before taking a seat. He leaned back, casual as could be, like it wasn’t weird to find the three of us in his office without him.

Zach responded. “Jojo wants to know what happened to Bennett’s face.”

I tossed a look over my shoulder at Noah where he was reclined behind me, now frowning. I said, “Since we’re in here, having a secret meeting about it, I’m going to assume it wasn’t that Zach got a lucky shot in when you guys were sparring or something.”

Noah was grim, his blue eyes tired behind his dark frames. “Unfortunately, no.”

I turned back to Bennett, narrowing my eyes in suspicion. “What, then?”

He glanced at Zach and then at Noah behind me before he said, “None of this is your business, Jolie, but I’m telling you because you need to know what you’re signing up for. You want to be an Heir, and you want to pick a fight with the most powerful people in this City. This is not a fucking picnic.”

And then he told me. The bullshit errand from his father, the threats he’d had to issue at the Alastia board meeting, and the

immediate attack after he'd left. The gun fight, the dead Spencer Enforcers, Zach and Noah arriving in just the nick of time….

Now the beast was *roaring*.

First Noah, now Bennett. It seemed Families would endanger their sons' lives without a thought as long as it put money in their fucking pockets.

Bennett was a stubborn shithead on his best days, but the thought of him *dead*? It was like a hollow pit had opened in my stomach.

I stood up, keeping a tight lid on my simmering rage, and I smoothed my skirt before looking him in his mossy green eyes. "Thank you for telling me."

I strode from the room, leaving them to have their own private meeting, and I didn't stop walking until I was outside Holywell Hall and within my favorite little copse of trees. I pulled my wool coat up around my face to fight the bitter wind, then I dialed Zepp.

"Boss lady."

"Hey. Do we have time for a little unscheduled project?"

He hummed as he mulled it over. "Probably. Things are rolling along with our… scheduled one."

"Good. This one needs to be quick and dirty."

"Tell me more."

So, I did. He chuckled knowingly, called me a savage, and then put the ball in motion.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NOAH



The low hum of my phone vibrating against our kitchen counter interrupted my hunt for the alt-milk coffee creamer in the fridge.

I slammed the fridge door, then I reached for the phone. The image on the screen—the lion-themed Hargraves crest—announced that the caller was my dad, and I braced myself for his latest bullshit.

His sporadic calls used to mostly just annoy me; since Jolie came back, they had increased in frequency and now came with a creeping sense of dread.

"Dad," I said as I accepted the video call with a swipe. I propped the phone against Bennett's ridiculous five-thousand-dollar espresso machine, and I set about continuing to pour myself a drip coffee like one of the unwashed masses.

"Noah," Dad greeted me from the camera on his laptop. The turquoise waters of the Maldives—at least I *thought* it was the Maldives this time—sloshed happily behind him, and I could hear feminine giggling in the background. He was clearly in pretending-to-work mode, because he had a white collared shirt on instead of a tank top, open at the neck to reveal his ridiculous tan. "How's school?"

The fake small talk irritated the shit out of me. "Fine. Coursework for this semester seems manageable. My TA gig keeps me busy.

Nothing major to report."

He hummed. "Well, we did have that little hiccup last week. The Tier Ones were pretty unsettled."

Not that he had done anything about it except whine at me via text message. "Yeah. Was a minor blip for the Families, all things considered," I replied breezily, still puttering around the kitchen so that he'd get the hint that I was in the middle of shit.

"Still, I do worry about having Jolie Knight running around the Academy, poisoning our allies against us. Benjamin Ling called me personally last night and told me his daughter thinks the Knight girl is trying to… *seduce* you, son."

Fucking Annie. "That's ridiculous, Dad. You're letting the whining of a petty, jealous girl intrude on your *vacation*?"

He sighed, running a hand through his graying blond hair. "You're right, of course. I just wanted to be sure you were focused on the important things, Noah. Everything we do, we do for Hargraves. For the rule of the Families. There's no room for old… affections."

There was no room for any affection in my Family. We made sure the empire was humming, the coffers were overflowing, and we didn't give a shit about each other.

"I'm aware, Dad. I'm keeping an eye on things here for you, as always."

He gave me a patronizing smile. "Of course you are. I raised you to be such a *capable* young man. You'll be ready to take the wheel of the Hargraves in no time."

I popped the lid onto my travel coffee cup. "Did you need anything else?"

A squeal sounded in the distance. "Peter! Come play!"

He glanced off camera and shot his companion a knowing smile before he returned his gaze to me, looking only slightly guilty about the interruption. "You know, the Lings are important partners for us. I would never push you into the type of archaic contract James has thrust onto Bennett, *but* I suggest you use that handsome face and abundance of charm you inherited from me to make sure Annie feels *wanted*, if you know what I mean." He gave me an obnoxious wink.

"For the Family, huh?"

My sardonic tone flew right past him. “You got it, son. Talk to you later!”

He hung up, his perfunctory check-in crossed off his list for the week. I shoved my phone into my pocket and grabbed my bag as Bennett and Zach appeared from their respective bedrooms and made their way into our large common area.

“Sounds like Peter’s working hard, as usual,” Zach said as he loosened his bright blue tie and rolled up his shirtsleeves to reveal his tattooed forearms.

“Yep,” I replied, slinging the strap of my leather messenger bag over my shoulder. “And did you hear? I’m supposed to be an actual whore for the Family now.”

“Join the club,” Bennett muttered, smoothing his already impeccable suit jacket. At least his broken face was looking almost normal today.

We made our usual trek from our dorm to the dining hall for breakfast, students moving from our path and still gawking at us like it was the first day we’d arrived on campus. We were used to it—expected it, even—but it didn’t make it less tiresome.

At least it was Friday, which meant I had only my few morning classes and one afternoon block of office hours to get through before I could disappear back into the quiet comfort of our dorm for the weekend.



“Thank you *so* much, Noah,” Annie gushed from her seat in front of my desk. “I was pretty sure I had this right, but you always explain things so well. I wish you were my Advanced Computer Science professor.”

“You’re welcome, Annie,” I said politely, leaning back in my chair and feeling thankful we were finally through today’s pretext for Annie dropping into my office hours. “Was there anything else you needed?”

She hummed, giving me a coy look. I wondered how I’d ever found her attention amusing—back when I’d entertain her shameless

flirting and even sometimes flirt right back. Annie was pretty—delicate features, petite figure, shiny dark hair—and she was actually very smart despite pretending to need my tutoring all the time. Her family was among the wealthiest in the City and firmly linked with Hargraves, so it wasn't a stretch for her to think I'd be interested.

After the girl I'd dated last year had turned out to be just another user chasing Family money, I'd had zero interest in another relationship, but that didn't mean I'd decided not to enjoy the attention of pretty girls every now and then.

Until my dead best friend in disguise crashed back into my life.

Now I wanted the attention of one girl and one girl only, and it wasn't fucking Annie.

"I was wondering if there was anything *you* needed, Noah," she said softly, shifting in her chair to cross her bare legs under her skirt and making sure to flash me her panties as she did it. "You've got the weight of the Family on your shoulders. You're a full-time student and a TA. You've got a crazy bitch pretending to be one of you while trying to ruin your Family's good name. You need a *break*." She lowered her gaze like she could see my crotch behind my desk. "Let me come back there and show you I can suck cock just as well as the professionals at the Club."

Jesus Christ.

I chuckled, adjusting my glasses before spearing her with a look of derision. "That's doubtful."

I was finished entertaining her even though I knew my refusal to do so was probably going to be reported to my dad.

Her jaw dropped. "Noah!"

"You heard him, Slutty McSlutterson," Jolie said as she appeared in the half-open doorway, an amused look on her face that did little to disguise the malice in those aquamarine eyes as they bored into the back of Annie's head.

Annie whirled in her chair, still full to the brim with indignation. "Get the fuck out, you delusional skank. No one invited you in here."

Jojo snorted, stepping further into my office. She was still wearing the braided pigtails that Zach had insisted during our first class with her this morning were her way of punishing him. She had an adorable white beanie on her head, her cheeks still flushed from the

cold outside, and I'd never seen a more beautiful girl in my whole life.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure there's only one delusional skank in this office, and it's the girl who just told Noah she'd suck his dick like she was being paid to."

My dick was starting to take notice of all this talk about him, especially now that it was coming from Jolie.

Down, boy.

Annie jumped to her feet, now in a rage. "You're just jealous. You're a washed-up dead girl panting after the Heirs. No one gives a fuck who you used to be, especially not them." She advanced on Jolie, pointing a dark-red nail in her face. "Stay away from Noah. You know, if you need attention, I heard Donavan's coming back to school. I bet he'll pony up a lot more this time if he can say he fucked an ex-Heir."

Any amusement I felt witnessing this exchange vanished, the thought of that rapist garbage touching Jolie making my trigger finger itchy, but I needn't have worried.

Jolie moved with the speed we all now knew she possessed, lunging at Annie before slamming her up against the wall of my office. Annie shrieked, but Jolie backhanded her across the face before producing a knife from God-knew-where and shoving it up against Annie's trembling throat.

I adjusted myself under my desk.

"You think sexual assault is funny?" Jolie spat in a harsh whisper. "You think it's something to brag about? That you enabled a predator who's probably hurt someone in the past and will go on to do it again? You think Noah's *impressed* by you because of that?"

"Get… off… me," Annie hissed.

I stood up, knowing this was about to go too far. It would be… *challenging* to clean up if Jolie killed or severely maimed Annie Ling in my office in Holywell Hall, to say the least.

I walked over to them, and I ran a gentle, soothing hand down Jolie's back.

"Easy, sweetheart," I murmured. "Let's go ahead and let her go. I think you've scared her sufficiently for today."

She turned to me, a pretty pout on her lips and her knife not moving an inch. “Come on, Noah. Let me just… carve her up a little bit.”

Annie screamed, and I yanked Jolie away.

“You fucking crazy bitch!” Annie shouted before she grabbed her giant bag from the floor and sprinted from my office as fast as her four-inch heels would carry her.

Jolie burst out laughing. “God, that was hilarious. She almost peed her pants when I said I was going to cut her.”

I gave her a stern look, holding in my own laughter. “It was a little overzealous. You know how hard that would have been to clean up?”

She smirked. “Sorry I interrupted your blowjob negotiations.”

I couldn’t help myself, returning her smirk with an innocent grin. “Want to continue them?”

She rolled her eyes before shoving me back toward my desk. “Down, boy. I just came by to get the notes from Chem since I missed class yesterday.”

I winked at her, very pleased with the pink that was blooming in her cheeks at the moment, before I took my seat. I pulled up my notes on my laptop as she took the seat in front of my desk that Annie had vacated.

“You know,” I said as I watched her reclining lazily while she absently fidgeted with her cherry blossom necklace and scrolled on her phone, “the last time we were here like this, you stole from me.”

She looked up, quirking an eyebrow. “That’s true. I’m not here for nefarious purposes now, if that’s what you’re implying. I really do need the Chem notes, because apparently Mari spent the whole class messaging with her girlfriend.”

“I just wonder,” I continued, closing my laptop after sending the notes to her email, “what might’ve happened then if you’d have just asked me for what you needed.”

She barked out a disbelieving laugh. “Sure, Noah. You would’ve just forked over Hargraves Tower’s highest-clearance security codes to Joanna Miller, scholarship student from the Southside and massive pain in your ass.”

“No. But I might have given them to my best friend, Jolie Knight.”

She blew out a breath, those gorgeous eyes meeting mine and shining with defiance—but also what looked like regret. “You know why I did what I did, Noah. No need to keep beating that horse.”

“I don’t think the horse is actually dead yet, though, do you?”

She studied me like she was taking my mettle. I held her stare with the confidence of someone with nothing to hide.

Come on, sweetheart. Give me something.

She nodded like she’d made a decision before she reached toward the floor next to her chair where her backpack sat. She pulled something small from an inside pocket, then she handed it to me.

I turned the small silver flash drive over in my hand.

“This is your dad’s KnightKey500,” I whispered, shocked. “Where did you get this?”

“It was in James Spencer’s safe,” she replied.

“Oh. Shit.”

“Yeah.”

Bennett had no idea what James kept in his safe. This was huge.

I popped open my laptop again and plugged the drive into one of its ports, then I turned the screen to the side so that we could both see it.

A simple black dialogue box popped up, demanding the encryption key before it would reveal what was on the drive.

I looked at her. “I’m guessing you don’t have the key?”

She shook her head. “No, and I’ve learned from Anders that James Spencer doesn’t have it either. But that he wanted it. Very badly.”

I met her eyes again, an understanding passing between us.

Whatever was on this drive probably held at least some of the clues as to why the Knights had been killed.

“Well, the key will be long,” I explained. “A hundred-plus characters. It’s probably on its own separate device, not just like, scribbled down on a scrap of paper somewhere. I’m sure they’ve combed through the Knight servers and come up with nothing?”

I would have my team do the same thing, just in case.

“Yeah, and I have no idea where else to look,” she admitted, her sudden defeated posture so unlike the strong, unflappable woman my best friend had become.

I hated it.

“Thank you for telling me, sweetheart,” I said with a warm smile. “I’m sure you have… *help* with this, but now I can help you too. I have my own team.”

“You do?” she asked, giving me a skeptical look. “A team that answers only to you and not to your dad?”

This was where I was going to divulge a secret of mine, since she’d just done the same for me.

“I’ve cultivated some loyalties,” I said. “I don’t have an independently funded operation, but over the years, I’ve made alliances and earned the trust of some of the best minds in Hargraves. They work for *me*, not the Family, though it doesn’t look that way on paper.”

She grinned. “Of course you have that. The right kind of people have a sense for who really deserves their loyalty and respect.”

Those sincere words made my chest swell with pride. “So, anything I can do to help you get answers about your parents, I’ll do. Do you trust me when I say that?”

She studied me again, back to being the stone-cold Valkyrie who both scared the shit out of me and turned me on so much, I ached. “I do trust you, Noah. Do you trust me when I say that anything I do that may negatively affect Hargraves has nothing to do with how I feel about you?”

I could only nod. I *was* Hargraves, as much as my dad was, but I understood what she was saying.

My dad was complicit in the murder of her parents. She wasn’t going to let it stand, no matter what it was her father had supposedly done to deserve it. My legacy would be an unfortunate casualty if she succeeded.

She stood up, throwing her backpack over her shoulder. “Thanks for the notes. And for… the help.” She turned to leave.

“Jojo,” I said quietly.

She paused, looking back at me over her shoulder.

“Promise me you’re being careful. I won’t lose you again.”

Her face softened. It was there, clear as day—the affection I craved.

“I am, Noah. See you later.”

She clicked the door shut behind her, and I sat there in the quiet of my office for several long minutes, staring at the lock screen of her dad's flash drive, willing it to give me answers for her.

My phone buzzed.

"Sir." It was my team lead, Silver. "We've noticed some… *interesting* activity by the management of Hargraves Technologies."

Only the biggest, most profitable company we owned—containing all of the Knight properties we'd *assumed* after their death.

"What do you mean?"

"The board members and the CEO have called a secret meeting. Without your father. They're doing their best to be extremely clandestine and moving quickly, like they've been spooked."

Jolie.

"I see."

"So, we can raise the alarm, warn your father, start trying to get ahead of this, or…."

Her unspoken words let me know that the team saw a viable option here other than the "right" one.

"Hold for now. Continue to monitor and keep me updated on how things progress. In fact," I went on, knowing I was about to really put my team's loyalty to the test, "I would like for us to ensure that my father and the rest of Hargraves do *not* find out what's going on here until I make the call."

"Yes, sir." I could hear the smile in her voice.

She hung up, and I made peace with my decision.

If Jolie wanted her legacy back, I wasn't going to stand in her way.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JOLIE



It was Tuesday after crew practice—a week after he'd walked into Economics class with a busted face—when Bennett cornered me outside the locker rooms.

The dim hallway was deserted, most of our teammates having long made their way back up to the dining hall for dinner. I'd just finished dressing in my Academy-issued sweats after taking a long hot shower, and I hadn't made it three steps outside of the locker room door before a strong hand wrapped around my bicep and yanked me into the nearest quiet corner.

"Bennett, what a surprise it's you who is manhandling me in a hallway yet again," I deadpanned.

Similar to how it was with Zach, my body apparently recognized Bennett immediately and determined he wasn't a threat, because I allowed him to drag me where he wanted without putting up a fuss. My back now against the wall, I looked up into those haunting green eyes and found him glaring at me, as usual, but also looking… befuddled? It was like he was trapped somewhere in between disbelief, awe, and his normal pissed off.

"What?" I demanded.

"I just received a call from a woman who is apparently my new private banker in the Cayman Islands," he said slowly, like he was still processing it. "An account was opened in my name earlier today,

and a very large sum of money was deposited into it shortly thereafter."

I tried to look casual, giving him a shrug. He smelled nice, and his dark-brown hair was still wet from his own shower, giving him a softer look than his usual styled perfection. "Congratulations. You're even richer than you were twelve hours ago."

He speared me with a look. "I do not think it is a coincidence that I was told, mere hours prior to this phone call, that Alastia had somehow just imploded, its shares all liquidated and disappearing without a trace. I was also informed that its CEO, George Layne, is now sitting in jail in South Carolina for solicitation of a minor." He stepped closer, our bodies now separated by mere inches, his voice low. "The amount of cash that was deposited into *my* new bank account is a pretty damn close match to the valuation of a giant successful City company like Alastia."

I kept my face blank. "Is there a question in there?"

He shut his eyes, wincing like he was in pain before he opened them again to search my face like he was desperate for an answer. "Did you do this?" he whispered.

"Does it matter?" I whispered back.

"Yes," he huffed before he blew out a shaky breath. "If they find out it was you…. Spencer is scrambling. My father's a nightmare. One of our most profitable partners just… vanished."

I frowned. "They tried to kidnap you. They'd have *killed* you."

He shook his head. "My father doesn't know. We were debating how we wanted to deal with it."

"Well," I snapped. "It's dealt with."

"Clearly," he snapped back.

We eyeballed each other, the silence between us deafening. I could see his brain whirling as he tried to process this information while the emotional turmoil roiled within him.

Finally, he stepped back, running a frustrated hand through his damp hair before he held it out, like he was reaching for me, but he quickly closed his fist and dropped it to his side, thinking better of it. Instead he just murmured, "Thank you."

He turned to leave.

“Hey, Bennett,” I said, my words soft and quiet like I was suddenly a timid little mouse.

Don’t crush me, Spencer.

He looked back. “Yes?”

“If things had turned out… differently… would you have done it for me?”

He held my gaze, suddenly wearing the pain of the last seven years on his handsome face. His eyes were tortured and his words angry when he replied, “I would have done *anything* for you.”

Then he stalked off.



I hadn’t even made it into the dining hall to get my hands on the artisanal sandwich of my dreams before I was accosted yet again.

Noah slid in front of me, blocking my way to the doors. He was casual this evening in his gray cashmere sweater and fitted dark jeans that both molded perfectly to his runner’s body, and he wore a blinding smile that could light up even the darkest recesses of my cold, broken heart.

“Hey,” he said, taking several steps toward me.

“Hi?” I replied, suddenly on my heels, stepping backward as he advanced.

His beautiful smile somehow got even bigger. “You care about us.”

He was still walking toward me. I continued to fumble backwards until I came to an abrupt halt, my ass ramming into a large, potted ficus that sat neatly against the wall near the dining hall doors.

“Noah, what—”

“Bennett, as much as he would actually take a bullet for you, has been a complete ass since you came back. But you still *care* for him. For us.”

He grabbed me gently by the hips, moving me from my precarious position halfway on top of the ficus and depositing me against the wall right next to it. He kept his hands where they were and pressed his forehead to mine, and I became a pliant noodle in

his hands. I stared into those deep blue eyes, mesmerized and not having a clue as to what the fuck was going on.

“You—somehow—destroyed an entire Tier One company, stole every dollar of its worth, and secretly gave it all to Bennett. You gave him a lifeline—his own pot of money, no Family strings, to do with as he wants. You gave him *freedom*. And all because people connected to that company endangered his life.”

I was beet red. I’d definitely done all of those things—with my extremely capable team of Shadows, of course—and I’d done it because I was mad, and the thought of Bennett dead made *me* want to die, however stupid and pathetic that was.

And now Noah was looking at me like I’d hung the moon, and he was holding me like I was a precious treasure.

“So,” he went on, now very pleased at how much he’d made me—a stone-cold, badass bitch—blush. “You care about him. You care about us. It makes me very happy, sweetheart.”

“Of course I do. I told you I wasn’t—”

Suddenly, his lips were on mine.

Sweet and gentle, I could feel the affection, the longing, and the gratitude he poured into the kiss, and I melted for him.

I’m kissing Noah—my sweet, wonderful Noah.

After a few blissful seconds, he pulled back, cupping my face as his long fingers brushed my cheek, and I let out a little whimper at the loss of him.

“Fuck,” he whispered, and then he dove back in. This time he was insistent, *hungry*, his tongue licking across my lips and demanding entrance as he took a firm, possessive grip on the back of my head.

I opened with a moan, and his tongue found mine, stroking it, then he sucked my lower lip into his mouth before our tongues tangled again.

He let out his own little pleased moan against my lips as I combed my fingers through his wavy blond hair. I sent the other hand south to finally get a feel of his pert ass.

“Ahem,” a harsh whisper sounded from nearby.

We froze. Noah blew out a frustrated breath as he pulled away, moving his hands to encircle my waist like it was the most casual

thing ever for him to be touching me like this in the middle of the hallway.

Hannah Langford stood a few feet away, looking amused. “Just a heads-up that the masses are on their way out of the hall. You two might want to move this little rendezvous somewhere more private than behind a ficus unless you want the entire Academy—or the entire City, really—talking about it.”

Noah scowled at her, but I gave him a light shove so that he’d let me off the wall. I dropped my hand into his, giving it a squeeze, and then his sunshine smile was back.

“Thanks, Hannah,” I said. “This was… unplanned.”

She snorted. “Sure it was. I’m pissed at you, actually. I had my money on Zach in the pool.”

“What?” I asked, my eyes narrowing. Noah just chuckled next to me.

“Mari, Devin, John Tyler, and I have a pool going. Which of the Heirs was going to be the first to make a move. Only John Tyler had Noah. Way to give a win to the dudes, Knight.”

“Oh my God,” I groaned.

“I always did like JT,” Noah commented lightly, like he was musing over the fucking weather.

“It’s the quiet ones,” Hannah whispered conspiratorially. “They’ll surprise you.”

“Okay,” I said, drawing out the word. “Bye, Hannah.”

“Later!” She turned and, with a little wave, tossed her dark-red hair, her ridiculous emerald-green pantsuit clashing with the sea of neutrals and pastels as she sashayed down the hallway.

Noah pulled me to him again, this time to press a sweet kiss to my forehead. “Sorry I got carried away there, sweetheart. It won’t happen again. Not until the time is right.”

What? “Noah, wait—what does that mean?”

He was already backing away, grinning, his eyes alight with mischief. “Bye, Jojo.”

I watched him leave, a definite pep in his step, while I was left with the sneaking suspicion that I was now being cruelly edged by *two* of my hot ex-best friends.



I had been correct. Over the next two weeks, I became certain that the low-level horniness that had been at a constant simmer since the first time Zach crawled into my bed was going to boil over any day now, then I would just expire on the spot. Cease to exist. Melt away into nothing.

Zach still slept over most nights, often arriving long after I'd fallen asleep and disappearing even before my early morning alarm. I always knew when he was there, though, because his spicy citrus smell would linger on the sheets, and I still hadn't had a nightmare.

Noah did not kiss me again—not like *that*, anyway. He did do a lot of staring at my lips, and he was a bit freer with the touching—a squeeze to my hand, a sweet-and-just-this-side-of-too-sexual sweeping of my hair behind my ear, or a soft, chaste kiss to my cheek when we parted ways. But mostly, it was like we'd fallen right back into our old friendship. The tension that had lingered between us had vanished, and I had *my* Noah back again.

It made me even more confident in my decision to leave my dad's flash drive in his possession. I didn't think he'd make any more headway than I had—we needed the encryption key, period, end of story—but Dom made the point that it was probably safer in Noah's hands than mine.

Assuming I could trust him, of course, but I somehow knew with an unshakable certainty that I could.

We didn't know if James Spencer would come looking for that drive as Anders feared he would, but it was unlikely he'd target Noah in his search.

Bennett's face had healed completely, quelling the possessive monster that lived inside of me that I struggled to control. He seemed stressed, but then one day I caught him actually *laughing* with Zach and Noah—in *public*—so things couldn't have been all bad.

The elation at seeing Bennett lit up and laughing with them had been swiftly smothered by the soul-crushing sorrow that I was no longer a part of it. The whole thing had almost torn me into sad, pathetic little pieces, and I'd run from the room.

I'd had to remind myself too many times that I wasn't here for this. I was here to prove I was a proper Heir, and I couldn't lose focus on the war going on behind the scenes. The Families had been quiet, oblivious to our current *project* and still seemingly content to hope I failed to make the necessary impression at the Academy while they tried to poke and prod at the small part of my operation that they knew about.

Knight Acquisitions, Inc. was warding off almost daily attempts to hack into its system, and Dom and Max had to have a stern chat with two different Family goons they'd caught sneaking around the bookstore. It was nothing we hadn't expected or seen before, but we were all still constantly on our guard.

And that was how Max ended up as my escort to Zach's twentieth birthday party, to be held this evening at none other than the Euphoria Club—Andrea's base of operations and the scene of one of my infamous B&Es.

"Are you two quite done?" Mari asked irritably from her spot on the plush white couch in our dorm apartment. "Por amor del Dios, this is a birthday party, not a SWAT raid."

Max and I stood in the dining room, where we'd been busy finding the best places to stash our weapons—which were currently lined up in a neat little row on the table—without ruining our outfits.

"Ah, let them do what they need to feel safe, mi corazón," Carmen said, squeezing Mari's hand. "We are going into the belly of the beast, after all."

Max grinned and pointed at Carmen with the little dagger he was holding. "What she said."

Mari huffed. "You've been here less than a day, and already Max likes you more than me, querida."

Carmen laughed, tossing a wink back in our direction. I'd met her many times on video calls, and she was every bit as charming in person. She was petite like Mari, but slender where Mari was curvy, and she had honey-brown hair, pale skin, and the cutest tortoise-shell glasses. She wore a deep-purple romper paired with chunky black sneakers, and because she was a woman after my own heart, she'd pulled her long hair into a sleek ponytail.

Mari wore a sexy little black dress with red pumps, while I'd opted for a sheer white blouse that showed off my fancy black bra, a black leather miniskirt, dark tights, and heeled boots. Max looked slick in his gray Henley and tight jeans, and his long black hair was in his usual artfully messy knot. He threw on the puffy vest that was going to hide his handgun.

"I love all of my ladies equally," Max announced, "and I am prepared to defend your honor tonight should anything go awry in the Ferrero snake pit."

I pulled on my own wool coat, tucking my last knife into an inside pocket. "Zach swore up and down there would be no issues with my attending a party at the Club. He gave me the biggest fucking puppy dog eyes and made me promise I'd be there." I ignored the waggling eyebrows and knowing looks I was getting from all three of them. "So, I'm not worried. And this is pretty much Max's and my every day casual wear, anyway."

Mari rolled her eyes before hopping to her feet, pulling Carmen up with her. "Let's go, then, Laura Croft. Your *man* will be disappointed if we're late."

Max coughed as he muttered, "You mean *men*."

They giggled as Max leaned forward to give them each a high-five, and I mentally disowned him as I zipped my jacket and grabbed my purse, griping, "You guys are the worst."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ZACH



"Happy birthday, Zachary. I'm sorry I have to rush off like this, but I'm sure you do not want your *mother* lurking around your birthday party."

I definitely did not. Guests had already started arriving in droves, the students of Holywell Academy dying for a glimpse inside the fabled Euphoria Club. I'd known Mom was still here, having just finished entertaining the usual balding, fat, lecherous businessmen she bilked out of their money on a regular basis, so I'd had to stop by or risk her throwing a passive-aggressive temper tantrum later.

I kissed her cheek as she swanned past me. "Thanks for the party, Mom. And for letting us use the Club."

She waved a dismissive hand at me. "Anything for my baby." She stopped in the doorway of her office, turning to frown at me like a thought had just occurred to her. "The Knight girl isn't coming, is she?"

I shrugged. "The invitation went out to the entire Academy. She might be."

She'd fucking better be.

"Zachary, really," Mom chided. "That little bitch broke in here and snooped in my most private business. I've only *just* managed to calm our most important investors down about all of her… nonsense."

“I’ll make sure she behaves, Mom,” I replied with a mischievous grin. “Don’t worry.”

She looked me up and down, then a knowing, proud smile appeared on her red lips. “Alright, then. I trust you to *handle* her, baby. Good luck.”

Then she disappeared down the hall.

I blew out a relieved breath before pasting my usual lazy smile back on my face. I checked my reflection in one of the three mirrors Mom kept in her office, satisfied my tight white designer T-shirt, ripped black jeans, and dark boots gave off the desired I-don’t-give-a-fuck-that-there’s-a-dress-code-because-I-own-this-place vibe, then I sauntered back out onto the Club floor and headed straight for the Heirs’ VIP table in the center of the room.

A soft blue glow lit the spacious, open first floor, casting eerie, sensuous shadows over the hundreds of Academy students and alumni here to kiss my ass and get hammered on the free booze. The sultry music that played through the room was low and hypnotic, able to lull even the most sober person in the room into a trance that would ensure they’d return again and again.

Tonight’s theme was black and gold, and all the burlesque dancers and Club servers wore lingerie and other costume embellishments in those colors. A group of beautiful dancers—both male and female—commanded the stage along the north wall, seducing the crowd one perfectly choreographed routine at a time. Equally gorgeous servers flitted around the main floor and the open second floor above, and the awed, hungry looks my classmates were giving to the staff served as a reminder of why membership to the Club was the most sought-after in the City.

I passed Chad Hendrickson and his little fan club, the group of them sprawled on the teal velvet furniture that surrounded one of the Club’s many round gold-plated tables—theirs currently piled high with bottles of champagne and hard liquor. The uncomfortable look on their server’s face as I neared snagged my attention, so I changed direction and stalked over.

“Get your fucking hands off the staff, Hendrickson,” I barked, looming over the loveseat where he lazed. He yanked his hand away

from Cici's ass like he was a fucking toddler caught in the cookie jar. "I will toss your ass out of here if I see it again."

Chad pasted the sleazy grin on his face that he thought was his people-pleasing best. "My bad, Ferrero. You have to know that having your waitresses dressed like whores is sending some mixed signals. I thought this place was where we got to have our… *desires* met."

I gave him a droll look. "That feature is limited to the upper floors, and you're not on that fucking client list."

"Aw, come on, man," he said with a laugh. "Put in a good word for me! Surely those lovely ladies are looking for some more young, virile cock to ride—you, Hargraves, and Spencer can't be having *all* the fun."

I shot him a cocky smirk even though it had been… *a while* since any of us had utilized our privileges upstairs. "Of course we can."

He sighed dramatically as though I'd wounded him, and I turned and stalked away without a backwards glance. I pulled my phone from my pocket and sent a message to the head bouncer on duty to make sure someone kept an eye on Hendrickson.

I almost hoped he put a toe out of line so I could have an excuse to beat the fuck out of him. I hadn't forgotten that he'd broken my Princess's face last semester, and he was still on my shit list for it.

Though it did amuse me that, after Jojo's stunning, hard-on-inducing display at Fight Night, we'd all figured out that Chad's little hand injury that he whined about for a month was probably not from "a training accident with his sensei" as he'd claimed.

I hadn't gone five steps when I was waylaid again. Lisa stepped in front of me, lashes fluttering. Normally, I'd have been annoyed, but this little encounter actually fit neatly into my plans for this evening.

"Happy birthday, Zach," she said, breathy and coy. Her long nails played at the low neckline of her tight red dress. "I was hoping to have some time with you later to give you my… present. I think you'll *really* like it."

Showtime. "Oh, really?" I murmured, making a show of looking her up and down. Lisa was not unattractive—she had the body of a runway model and a fine-boned face made for the ads her family's entertainment company constantly featured her in.

Too bad I liked a girl with meat on her bones and scars on her knuckles.

She preened, slinking closer to run a hand up my chest. “*Really*. I just need somewhere a little more *private*, baby, then it’s all yours.”

I wrapped a hand around her throat, squeezing just this side of too hard, and she was putty in my hands. I leaned in close to whisper instructions in her ear, and I could feel her body trembling in anticipation of getting to fuck me at long last.

“See you later,” I whispered, releasing her and walking away before she could delay me any further.

I finally made it to the VIP area and collapsed onto the half-moon couch where Noah, Bennett, and Bennett’s *date* were holding court. A glass of bourbon was shoved into my hand by Dante, one of our most tenured waiters, as he cruised by. I took a giant gulp before I settled in to watch the door and await my Princess’s arrival.

“She’ll be here,” Noah said, grinning at me like an asshole as he poured himself another drink from the assortment at our table. He and Bennett were in dress code tonight, both wearing impeccably tailored slacks, fitted dress shirts, and dark blazers. “I know Jojo won’t be able to resist coming into Andrea’s house just as a ‘fuck you’ to her.”

“Too true,” I replied, then I punched him in the shoulder. “And you’re not out of the doghouse with me yet, man. I still can’t believe you kissed our girl before me. I have had the patience and control of a fucking *monk*, and you just went and jumped the line like that.”

His grin only got bigger. “I don’t regret it, but I’ve behaved these past few weeks. I’m letting you have tonight because it’s your birthday, and I know you have plans. I want to do something just as big to show her what she means to me.”

Never let it be said that Noah Hargraves wasn’t a damn decent friend. He would allow me my time with her, and I would do the same for him when his time came.

We were going to rock this co-boyfriend shit.

I was relieved he was coming around, anyway, which only left our fearless leader to pull his head out of his ass. Bringing that bitch Harper to this party was not a great start, even if he’d only done it because his dad had made a fucking stink about appearances.

Jojo's going all scorched earth in his honor had blown Bennett's fragile little mind, and he was slowly drifting off course, caught in a stormy sea of *feelings*. His reset mode was always to just do as Spencer required, ever the model-fucking-Heir.

"So, baby," Harper cooed at Bennett loudly enough over the music that Noah and I could make out her words. "I know our contract doesn't require exclusivity during the engagement period, but I'd love for you to take me upstairs and let me give you a little preview of what's to come. I think you'll find you won't need to visit the Club anymore when I show you just how *thoroughly* I can please you."

Bennett's jaw ticked, but he was otherwise unaffected—his great superpower with respect to everyone on the planet except Jolie Knight.

"I think you should relax and enjoy the party, Harper," he said in his usual monotone. "My visits to the Club are not your concern."

She huffed, taking a dainty sip of her drink as her eyes landed on the front entrance. She wrapped her possessive claws around Bennett's bicep, and that was how I knew my girl had arrived.

Jojo stepped out onto the Club floor, her arm linked with Max's—*who the fuck let him in here?*—looking like pure sex in a see-through blouse and a tiny fucking skirt. Her long hair fell around her face in soft waves, her luscious lips painted a dark red, and those gorgeous eyes were locked right on us.

"Damn," Noah whispered.

"Yeah," I agreed, swallowing hard.

One glance at Bennett told me he was now seething, his stormy eyes glued to Jojo while likely plotting the violent murder of every dude in here who was now openly checking her out.

Or they may have been checking *Max* out—he had that effect, even I had to admit, which just pissed me off more. No one was allowed to be hotter than me at my own party.

Mari and a girl that I guessed was her girlfriend flounced in behind them and then promptly bolted for the bar, while Max and Jojo processed through the room like royalty until they were standing in front of our table.

“Hey, guys,” she said, her aquamarine gaze sweeping across us and her lip curling when she spotted Harper clutching Bennett like he was going to make a break for it if she let go. Jojo shook it off—loath to let Bennett see her affected—and directed her gaze back to me with a little smile. “Happy birthday, Zach.”

“Hey, Princess,” I said, hopping to my feet. “Glad you could make it.”

“Happy birthday, Ferrero,” Max said with his usual shit-eating grin. “Hope you don’t mind me crashing—I’m Jojo’s bodyguard tonight.”

I plucked her from his grasp. She rolled her eyes but came willingly—fuck yes. “Thanks, man. I've got it from here.”

Noah stood, drink in hand, and made his way over to Jolie. He pulled her into a tight hug before placing a lingering kiss to her cheek. “I’m glad you came, sweetheart. Enjoy your night with Zach.”

She looked at him quizzically as he handed her back to me, while Max asked, “Going somewhere, Nolan?”

Noah tossed back the last huge sip of his drink, then he turned to give Max his most charming smile. “I’m the one tasked with making the rounds tonight. I hear the barbacks are short-staffed if you want to pitch in while you’re here, Miller.”

“*Noah*,” Jolie chided, but he just tossed her a wink and ambled away.

Max tutted under his breath, watching Noah as he faded into the crowd. “I’d beat his ass for that, but he’s too cute. That sexy smile and high, tight butt probably let him get away with just about anything.”

Jolie leaned over to stage-whisper, “I think it’s his billions.”

“Right.”

“Come on, Princess,” I said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, ready to get us back on track. “Dance with me for a little bit.”

She relaxed against me. “Fine. Inform Lisa that if she has a problem with it, she can fight me like a woman instead of a cowardly little bitch this time.”

I chuckled. “I’ll take care of it.”

Max bent to swipe one of our bottles of liquor off the table, giving Bennett an exaggerated once-over as he did it. “Hey, Spencer,” he rumbled. “Looking *good*, big man. Lose the skinny bitch, and I’ll show you a much better time.”

The asshole was playing with fire. Harper let out a scandalized gasp and looked to Bennett to defend her honor, but he only gave Max a dirty look before he took a sip of his drink and went right back to being bored.

Max chuckled as he floated past us, pressing a kiss to Jolie’s hair. “I’ll be… out and about. Stay safe, Jojo.”

He disappeared, and I tossed one last glance behind us at Bennett as I steered my girl to the dance floor.

He gave me a stilted nod of begrudging approval for my plans for the rest of the evening. I knew he was going to just sit here and suffer while Harper pawed at him and he did his best to make sure the building didn’t burn down around us.

Sorry, buddy, but you dug this hole.

It was my night with my girl, and I was going to fucking enjoy it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JOLIE



Dancing with Zach was every bit as hot as I remembered. Apparently all the time spent in his arms over this last month had done nothing to desensitize me to his wiles, and it only took a few songs before I was officially hot and bothered.

"Mmm, I missed this," he purred into my ear, his big hands running down my sides and grabbing my hips. "This body is wicked, Princess."

"Your guests are staring," I murmured, rubbing up against him and failing to care about the attention on us when I knew I should. "Surely Andrea has spies that will report back to her how you were groping me on the dance floor in full view of the entire Club instead of dragging me to a dark corner to dispose of me."

He gripped me tighter. "Nah, my mom thinks I'm honeypotting you into divulging all your secrets."

I spun in his arms, now staring into his dark eyes as I threw my arms around his neck. "Are you? You gonna seduce me, then throw me to the wolves, Ferrero?"

"No fucking way, Princess," he growled. "And I intend to prove it to you, starting tonight."

He grabbed my hand and proceeded to drag me through the clusters of drunken party guests and into the hallway that led to Andrea's office.

“Where are we—”

“Shh, baby. Just a little further.”

We hurried down the hall, my hand still tucked snuggly into his, and we stopped in front of a very familiar boring gray door.

“You’re taking me to your torture lair?”

He grinned, excitement dancing in his eyes as he reached into the pocket of his tight-as-fuck jeans and pulled out that familiar bronze key. “Yep. I have a surprise for you.”

He unlocked the door, and we slipped quickly inside. He turned the deadbolt on the lock before hitting a switch on the wall. A dim industrial lightbulb buzzed to life above us, lighting our way down the cement staircase, and we soon found ourselves in the cozy little lounge I recognized from my last trip down here.

Zach led me to the big leather couch and motioned for me to sit, then he ambled over to the bar cart in the corner to pour us both a drink.

I ogled his butt in those tight jeans as he went. There was no resisting it.

He prowled back toward me, his booted feet padding quietly across the plush red carpet, and he handed me a glass of bourbon before taking a seat next to me and snuggling up close.

After typing something into his phone, he wrapped a possessive hand around my thigh and looked me in the eyes. “I know we have a lot of other shit going on right now, Princess, but tonight I intend to right some wrongs from last semester.”

“Oh?” The burning curiosity kept my butt rooted to this couch, despite the fact that I was putting an awful lot of trust in Zach by letting him bring me down *here* alone. “What do you mean?”

His grin was evil, and the loud bang of the basement door being shoved open announced that we had visitors.

Heavy boots clomped down the cement stairs, the sounds of a struggle coming with them.

“What the fuck is this? Let me go, you fucking psychos! I was invited here! I don’t care who you work for, I’ll see you put down for this!”

Not unexpectedly, Frankie emerged into the light of the lounge, dragging a flailing, bleeding man behind him.

Less expected was the fact that he was scowling instead of his usual happy-go-lucky-could-give-two-shits-about-anything demeanor. It was odd, since he usually seemed thrilled to be maiming people in the name of Ferrero.

Then his accomplice stepped into the room wearing a shit-eating grin.

“Max?”

“Hey, Jojo! Look who I found sneaking around upstairs.”

Their struggling captive was Donavan. I hadn’t seen the asshole since I caved his face in with my fists in Lisa’s mom’s office at The Revelry, and it appeared his long respite from school had agreed with him. His doctors had put his face back together, and he’d even gained a little weight, like he’d spent his days at home getting even bulkier so his next unsuspecting victim wouldn’t stand a chance. His brown hair and beard were neatly trimmed, and he wore the same dark slacks and gray dress shirt as half the guests, so he would have easily blended into the crowd.

Until someone had given him a black eye and a very bloody nose.

Frankie dropped him unceremoniously onto the middle of the carpet, where he flopped around like a fish, struggling against the zip ties binding his wrists and ankles.

“This,” Frankie said, gesturing angrily at Donavan, “was *my* pull. I would like to make that clear.”

“You’re both a couple of pretty-boy pussies!” Donavan shouted.

Max kicked the shit out of him, chuckling as Donovan moaned, then he looked at Frankie. “Don’t be a sore loser, Mr. Fingers. I only let you have this piece of shit because you promised to show me your *skills*.” He purred that last word, and I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Max,” I said, very sweetly. “What the fuck?”

“Yeah, *Max*,” Frankie spat. “Max *Miller*, eighteen-year-old resident of the Southside and adoptive brother to Jolie Knight, *not* Max No-Last-Name, twenty-one-year-old UCLA student just passing through the City on holiday break—what the *fuck*?”

I glanced at Zach, who also appeared to be taken aback by Frankie’s distress as he watched this unfold with wide eyes. He shook his head at me, bewildered.

Max's grin only got bigger. "You know, you don't seem happy to see me again."

"Max," I growled.

We did not keep secrets from each other, though he had been known to *delay* informing me of things he knew I would not like.

I certainly would not like him spending time within a mile radius of the City's most notorious Family Enforcer without me knowing.

So, in short, I was going to kill him if Frankie didn't.

Frankie glared at Max before he bent to yank Donavan off the floor again to drag him toward the torture section of the basement's open floor plan. Max grabbed Donavan's legs, and Frankie's sour look said he did not appreciate Max's help.

"Put me the fuck down!"

"Shut up," Frankie snapped at him.

"I can't wait to see what Mr. Fingers is gonna do to your balls, asshole," Max added with a snicker.

"You shut up too."

"What is going *on*?" Zach muttered under his breath. "I have never seen Frankie this agitated."

"Me neither," I whispered. "And I once put my knife through his leg."

We turned to watch over the back of the couch as Frankie and Max strung their captive from the ceiling, both of them expertly ignoring the expletives and homophobic slurs being spewed at them.

Frankie slapped Donavan across the face before he grabbed his bearded chin to give him a reproachful look. "That's quite enough out of you. I suggest you behave for my nephew and his lady love, or I will come back down here and start my next abstract art project with your insides."

Donavan roared, yanking on the chains that held his arms aloft and swinging his now freed feet that dangled an inch from the cold cement floor.

Frankie turned to march back into the lounge, ignoring Max as he followed close behind. Frankie flopped down into the cushy armchair that sat adjacent to the couch, pulling his phone from his pocket. He began to scroll, still ignoring Max, who smirked at Frankie from

where he leaned up against the nearby wall. Suddenly, a tiny little grin crossed Frankie's face.

He looked at Zach. "You ready to take it from here?"

"Yep. The Princess and I will handle him."

"Cool." He slid his gaze to Max, and a taunting smile appeared on his face. "It appears two of my favorite boys are free this evening, so I'm headed upstairs."

Max's cocky smirk slid right off his face, causing Zach to snort out a very satisfied laugh next to me.

"The fuck you are," Max growled at Frankie.

Frankie's grin widened. "I'll see you all later." He stood up and ambled happily toward the stairs.

"Max, seriously, what the fuck?" I barked at him.

"Not now, Jojo," he grumbled, then he stalked out after Frankie.

Zach and I sat wordlessly for a minute, the clanking of the chains and Donavan's grunts the only sounds echoing through the room.

"I don't even want to know," Zach finally muttered, standing up and holding out his hand to me. "You ready for your present?"

I took his hand as I got to my feet. "Donavan is my present?"

He led me around the couch and onto the cold cement floor. "I know you already fucked him up pretty bad, baby girl, but I will not let this rapist scum walk the same hallways as you. I wanted to kill him as soon as I walked into that office last semester, and I'm sorry that I made it seem like I didn't care what almost happened to you. Or at least, what we *thought* almost happened to you before we knew you were so fucking lethal."

Donavan scoffed. "You've got to be fucking kidding me, Ferrero. You know we all thought she was just some trashy slut from the Southside. You're lying your ass off, acting like you give a shit now. *Everyone* thought she deserved what I was going to give her, including you."

Zach stepped in front of him, eyeing him with disgust. "You really have no sense of self-preservation at all, do you?" Without warning, he reached a strong hand between Donavan's legs to grip his junk, twisting it violently.

Donavan let out a high-pitched shriek, the sound music to my ears.

“Say one more word to insult my girl, and I’ll cut your tongue out. Frankie Fingers isn’t the only one who knows creative ways to inflict damage to the human body.”

I shivered and not from fear.

Zach turned to look at me over his shoulder, still keeping a vice grip around Donavan’s balls as he hyperventilated. “Say the word, Princess, and I’ll end him. Or I’ll give him to you to do with what you want.”

I eyed Zach, feeling myself sink into those dark-brown eyes. “What’s this about, Zach? Assuaging your guilt that you guys were dicks to me when you thought I was a nobody who’d only narrowly avoided sexual assault by sheer luck?”

He released Donavan and stalked toward me. He cradled my face in his big hands as he stared down at me with an intensity that rivaled Bennett on his broodiest day. “No, Princess. This is me apologizing for pushing you away by being a giant dick because my attention got you knocked out and chained to a radiator. This is also me declaring to you, here and now, that I will do anything for you—even if it brings the wrath of the almighty Four Families right down on top of me. You’re my missing piece, and I’m never letting anyone take you from me again. I’ll burn the world down for you and follow you into hell. I’ll destroy everyone who’s ever wronged you, or I’ll serve them up to you on a silver platter so you can punish them yourself like the badass warrior queen you are. I’m off my leash, baby girl, and I’m yours now.”

I gaped at him, my stomach flipping so dangerously that my knees trembled. “Mine?” I croaked. “As in…?” I needed him to spell it out. This was the man who’d slept in my bed for weeks and had done nothing more than kiss my cheek.

“All of it, Princess,” he purred. “Soulmates. Partners. *Lovers.”* He leaned in closer, our noses now almost touching, and he whispered, *“*Forever.”

“Oh.” Oh shit.

“God, this is so fucking disgusting,” Donavan spat.

I yanked the knife from the sheath strapped to my thigh under my skirt and launched it at him, impaling him right in his meaty thigh. “Shut the fuck up, asshole.”

He wailed as the wound started to bleed dangerously. Zach's pupils were now blown wide as he stared at me, and the look on his face was *hungry*. "That was fucking hot, Princess."

Then he finally—*mercifully*—yanked my face to his and smashed his lips against mine with a feral growl.

I opened for him, a wanton moan escaping me, and he devoured my lips, sucking and nibbling before he shoved his tongue into my mouth. He took what he wanted from me—consumed me like I was the air he needed to breathe, and I threw my arms around his neck and plastered my body against his, loving every goddamn second of it.

My Zach. My goofy, mischievous Zach. He came back to me, and he wanted me as much as I had to finally admit to myself that I wanted him.

"Princess," he murmured against my lips, pecking me again before pulling back to look at me. "As much as I don't mind an audience on occasion"—I filed that away for later—"that creepy fucker is not allowed to see you like this."

I sighed. "Right."

I released him and strode over to Donavan to muse over his fate. He was already starting to droop, the blood loss from the knife in his leg taking its toll. "Hey, dickface." I slapped his face lightly. "Answer my questions honestly, and I'll consider letting you leave here with your dick still attached to your body."

He spat at me, and I stepped swiftly out of the way just in time to avoid getting hit.

Zach was in front of him in an instant. He yanked my knife from Donavan's thigh before burying it expertly in his side in a way that would hurt like a bitch but miss his major organs.

"Do not," he growled. "Ever. Spit. At. My. Girl."

"Fuck you," Donavan managed to wheeze. "I can't wait until your mom tosses that bitch to your Enforcers. You think they'll take turns with her?"

Rage blanketed Zach's face, and he twisted the knife in Donavan's side, his smirk reemerging as he basked in the resulting squeals of pain.

I returned to Zach's side, running a soothing hand down his back before I looked at Donavan. "How many girls have you forced yourself on, you disgusting creep? There's no way I was your first target."

He glowered at me.

Zach twisted the knife again. "Better answer her, or I will."

"They… wanted it," he huffed between panicked breaths.

Zach tutted his disapproval. "Noah found no less than eight buried reports, either to your high school's disciplinary board or to the City police. You like to prey on scholarship students or other girls who lack the resources to put up a fight against your family when they throw money at your *predilections*."

I threw my fist into Donavan's face, further fucking up the nose that either Max or Frankie had broken before they dragged him down here. "You bastard. This shit ends now."

Zach produced a Glock from the waistband of his jeans. He held it out to me. "Do you want to do the honors? I have a cleanup crew ready to go."

"What the fuck!" Donavan shouted, thrashing. "You can't *kill* me."

Zach gave him a condescending glare. "Of course we can, idiot. *We* can do anything we want."

I stared down at the gun. It was tempting, but… it didn't feel right. I knew I wasn't going to get through this journey without blood on my hands. I even welcomed it.

But Donavan, while a piece of shit, wasn't on my list. He hadn't even touched me before I'd put him on the floor, so I hadn't been harboring the burning need to end his life.

But I sure as shit wasn't going to let him loose to harm another girl.

I shook my head at Zach. "He lives."

Zach pouted at me, but he nodded with understanding as he shoved the gun back into his pants.

"But…," I went on, eyeing Donavan again, "did Frankie teach you any cool tricks? I'd like him to never be able to get it up again."

Zach's grin was savage. "He sure did."

I stepped away, not needing a front-row seat for this part as Zach got to work. After he'd pulled the knife from Donavan's side and used

it to rip open his pants, I watched as he plucked a little scalpel from Frankie's collection of sharp, pointy things on the wall and then made quick work of Donavan's manhood. Donavan vomited and promptly passed out. Zach was back at the wall and wiping the blood off his blade within minutes, barely a hair out of place.

He sauntered back over to me, grabbed the back of my head, then laid a filthy kiss on my lips. I groaned, fisting the front of his soft T-shirt, but he pulled away far too quickly.

He put his phone to his ear, staring at me with his eyes full of promise as he mouthed, *"Later"* at me while it rang. "Yeah. It's done. Get him patched up enough that he doesn't die, then inform his family they are no longer welcome in Saint Gabriel City. I want them gone in forty-eight hours."

Good. Those rape-enabling pieces of shit needed to be shown the door.

Zach hung up the phone, then he pulled me into his arms again.

"How pissed is Andrea going to be about this?" I asked. I knew Donavan's family was connected to Ferrero.

He shrugged. "The family is Tier Two, but they were rapidly growing. My mom might notice their absence in a month or two. But —" He gave me an indulgent look before pressing a kiss to my temple. "—I have a feeling she'll have other things to worry about by then."

I grinned. "You know it."

"Let's get out of here, baby girl. It stinks like fear and vomit, and I have one more gift for you."

"You do?" I wasn't sure how he was going to top *that*.

That evil grin was back. "I think you're actually going to like this one better."

Well, then. "Lead the way, Ferrero."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

JOLIE



The elevator doors opened to a quiet immaculately decorated floor above the Club's main levels, and it took me all of two seconds to figure out exactly where we were.

"You brought me to the *brothel*?" I whisper-yelled at Zach.

He chuckled like I was just so cute. "Relax, Princess. We have a private wing up here too."

He held my hand tight as we wandered down the hall. The floor was indistinguishable from a guest wing in a luxury hotel—the dark wallpaper was custom-made, embellished with gold geometric designs, and the gray carpet under our feet felt plush and new. Small alcoves housed rococo-inspired side tables topped with vases of colorful fresh flowers, and it smelled like rich vanilla.

There were nameplates on the doors to the many suites that lined the hall, sporting names like "King," "Vale," and "Dmitri." It was mostly quiet, though I caught an errant moan or the occasional banging of a headboard through the walls as we walked.

As we turned a corner, we ran into a beautiful man with shiny silver hair that fell artfully across his cheek. He wore tight leather pants and a silky floral shirt that he'd left open, showing off his sleek, toned torso.

Zach slowed to offer him a fist bump. "What's up, Kai?"

Kai grinned at us, eyeing our intertwined hands with interest. “Hey, Zach. Who’s your friend?”

Zach tossed his arm over my shoulder and puffed out his chest. “This is my girlfriend.”

I will not swoon in this hallway.

I held out my free hand. “Jolie Knight. Nice to meet you, Kai.”

Kai’s smile turned mischievous. “Charmed,” he purred as he took my hand, lifting it to his soft lips for a kiss.

Zach rolled his eyes and yanked my hand away. “That’s enough out of you, man.” Kai just shot me a saucy wink, then Zach asked, “Hey, has Frankie been up tonight?”

Kai shook his head, jutting his lush lower lip out in a little pout. “No, not tonight, and it’s been a while. If you see him, tell him the boys miss him.”

My eyes widened at that, and Zach snorted. “Will do. See you later, dude.”

We continued along the hall until it dead-ended into a heavy black door with a key panel set into the wall next to it.

As Zach punched in the code, I said, “So, Frankie seems… popular.”

The panel beeped and the door’s lock disengaged with a loud clang. Zach opened the door and ushered me through.

“The only people in this City who aren’t scared shitless of Frankie Fingers are the men who work in the Club. They love him. Don’t ask me to explain it, because I can’t.”

We were now in a separate wing, the suite doors in the short hallway identical to the ones we’d passed except there were no names on them. Zach stopped at the first door on the left and began to unlock it with another key code.

“Wait a minute,” I said, my brain finally catching up after overcoming the shock of getting to see the infamous Club sex wing. “Are you taking me to the room where you fuck your hookers?”

He paused, arching an eyebrow at me, and I felt it happening.

I couldn’t stop it.

My lower lip jutted out in a pout that would rival Kai’s, and I pulled my hand from his to cross my arms over my chest in an angry huff.

I wouldn't begrudge Zach—or Noah, or Bennett—their activities here. Lord knew it was preferable to them fucking their way through our vile classmates where I would have undoubtedly had to hear about it.

But the thought of being in the same room where Zach had been… *entertained*, especially on our first night together? I wasn't into it, to put it mildly.

Zach was on me in a flash, pushing me up against the wall next to the door as he caged me in with his big, tattooed arms. He buried his face in the crook of my neck before running his lips up the side of my throat, barely skimming the sensitive skin there.

"Princess," he murmured. "I would never do that. This is my personal bedroom to crash in if I ever need to stay here. The ladies work on the floor above us, and that's where they stay."

I blew out a breath. I did not love this conversation, but I was the one that had started it.

"And," Zach went on, now nibbling on my ear as he whispered softly, "I need you to know that I haven't visited the girls upstairs in quite some time. None of us have—not since before you came back to us. I haven't been fucking other women and then coming to your bed at night. I swear it."

That was something I'd tried hard not to wonder about, but as that last little bit of tension released, I knew I'd needed to hear it.

I threaded my fingers through his hair before gripping it tightly, then I yanked his mouth to mine for another scorching kiss. He growled happily, sucking on my tongue as soon as I gave it to him. My panties were soaking, and I hummed with delicious satisfaction at the feeling of his very solid erection pressed against my hip, straining through his tight jeans.

We'd have stayed like that for an hour if my curiosity hadn't finally overcome me.

"So," I said against his lips. "What's my second present?" I pulled back to give him a dubious look. "Is it your dick?"

He let out that sexy, throaty chuckle of his. "No, it's not. Though I will absolutely give you that, too, Princess. All you have to do is ask."

I groaned and shoved him toward the door, motioning for him to get a move on.

He finally unlocked the door, and we stepped into a spacious bedroom with dark hardwood floors, a pristine cream rug, and a huge four-poster bed. A tall lamp in the corner illuminated the room with a soft yellow glow, and I could see through the open bathroom door that it contained a massive white-tiled shower.

Zach put a finger to his lips as he led me further into the room, but I pulled up short when I realized it was already occupied.

Lisa was sprawled across the bed, wearing only a sheer red lace bra and a tiny fucking thong. She still wore her stilettos, and she had a silky-looking blindfold draped over her eyes. One hand was attached to the headboard with a fuzzy black handcuff.

“Zach? Is that you, baby?”

Instead of answering her, he pulled me close to whisper softly into my ear, “Just trust me, baby girl. This is all for you.”

I glared at him, because *what the fuck*, but I kept my mouth shut and decided to let him direct this show.

“Lisa,” Zach purred, and she squeaked with excitement at the sound of his voice. “You followed my instructions so well.”

“Of course I did,” she breathed. “I’ve been waiting for you for *ages*, baby.”

We stood side by side at the foot of the bed, Zach’s arm wrapped around my waist while he rubbed little circles on my hip with his thumb, and we both eyed Lisa with distaste. She trembled with excitement as she awaited the dick she’d apparently been promised. Zach swiped what looked like the key to the handcuffs from where it lay tossed on the comforter nearby, and he shot me a sexy wink as he tucked it into his pocket.

He cooed at her, “Well, let’s not keep you waiting any longer, then. You can take the blindfold off now.”

Using her free hand, she pulled the black fabric from her eyes, and I watched with immense pleasure as her coy little smile dimmed the second she spotted me tucked neatly against Zach’s side.

“What the hell is *she* doing here?” Lisa screeched, sitting up with a jolt, her cuffed hand jerking with the movement.

“Oh, did I forget to mention I was bringing a date to our little meeting?” Zach asked with a smirk. “My bad, Lisa. I believe you’ve met, but I’m not sure you’ve really comprehended who she is.” He

turned to give me an indulgent stare, hearts practically in his eyes. “This is Jolie Knight, the fourth Heir of the Four Families of Saint Gabriel City. She’s also my girlfriend.”

“*What?*” Lisa shrieked, yanking harder on her chained hand. “Zach, you can’t be serious!”

Zach leaned in to press a slow, tantalizing kiss to the crook of my neck, and Lisa’s perfectly contoured face flushed with rage.

I grinned at her. “Feeling a little helpless being handcuffed to an immovable object right now, Lisa?”

“I thought it was a nice touch, myself,” Zach added with a devious smile. “Though, it turns out you were never helpless even for a second, right, Princess? I never did ask you how you got out of the handcuffs.”

“Hairpin,” I replied, and his low hum of approval stroked my ego like it was a smug little kitty cat.

“Zach! Unlock me this instant!” Lisa demanded. “Are you drunk? What has gotten into you? This pretender *whore* has been spreading lies about your Family. You are not *dating* her. You don’t date anyone!”

“I do now,” he replied breezily, running his big hand lovingly up and down my side. “And it’s interesting you’re throwing the word *whore* around when you’re the one that shoved your panties in my pocket at the Holiday Ball. Stones and glass houses and all that.”

I coughed out a laugh before shooting her a disapproving look. “Really, Lisa? That’s some tacky shit for a girl of your… *breeding*.”

“Ugh, shut *up*, you stupid bitch,” she snapped. “Enough, Zach. Unlock me.”

“No,” he barked, and Lisa and I both snapped to attention at the change in his tone.

Now he sounded *pissed*.

With another quick kiss to my hair, Zach released me, then he walked over to the small wooden dresser that sat along the wall next to the bathroom door. He opened a drawer and pulled out a thin manila folder before stalking back over to the foot of the bed. He set the folder on the comforter and flipped it open, then he grabbed my hand to pull me in next to him once again.

“It’s interesting, Lisa,” he began, pulling some large photos from the folder before he tossed them one by one onto the bed in front of us. “How we all think we’re so untouchable—the Families, our Tier One brethren. Your mom certainly thinks so, because she hasn’t really been very discreet with her extracurricular activities lately.”

I sucked in a breath when I registered what was in the photos. A woman who was surely Lisa’s mother—she looked just like her except twenty years older with huge fake tits—was depicted in all sorts of *compromising* positions with an attractive man around the same age.

Lisa’s face paled. “Where… where did you get those?”

“I can get anything I want,” Zach replied with a smile. “And do you know who was less than thrilled to receive copies of these photos from me? Marcia Russo—the wife of the man in these very dirty—and extremely kinky—photos.”

Oh *fuck*. Marcia Russo was Lisa’s mother’s business partner and biggest investor in their company.

“What the fuck, Zach?” Lisa shouted, back to yanking on her chain. “What are you doing?”

“I regret to inform you, Lisa,” Zach went on, “That Marcia’s decided to end her relationship with Aviano Entertainment. She’s also sent these photos to some of your mother’s other large investors, and they have also decided to part ways. And it turns out Marcia’s also petty as fuck, so, as of a few hours ago, the majority interest in your family’s company was sold to Knight Acquisitions for a tidy little sum.”

“What?” I exclaimed. My people hadn’t said anything about this to me!

“Surprise, baby girl.” He cupped my cheek and laid a sweet kiss on my lips. “Your lawyers were a dream to work with. I owe them a fruit basket.”

“You spoil me,” I said, beaming at him as butterflies erupted in my belly. “And they prefer muffins.”

“Noted.”

“Zach!” Lisa cried, now kicking her stilettoed feet like a toddler having a tantrum. “You can’t do that! My family’s company is Ferrero’s most important partner!”

Zach lost all mirth as he pinned her with a cold, deadly glare. “You want to know why I did it, Lisa? You *hurt* my girl. You endangered her life—twice, because I know you conspired with that bitch Harper to strand her in the middle of the fucking river. I’m tired of looking at you. I’m tired of your desperate, pathetic attempts to fuck me. And I’m tired of listening to you insult the girl who’s had my entire fucking heart since I was old enough to know what it meant to care about someone.”

I swayed on my feet. Zach was going to heal the cracks in my broken heart one gruff, impassioned declaration at a time.

God, I’d fucking *missed* him.

“You know we didn’t know who she was back then! She’s a shady, lying bitch!” She forced out a dramatic sob, but Zach plowed on.

“Your mom’s packing her shit as we speak because she’s about to get chased the fuck out of the City, and I suggest you do the same. If I see your face within the walls of the Academy, I’ll throw you into the Fight Night ring with Jojo, and you’ll be lucky to leave with a recognizable face. I don’t give a fuck who your family is, because you’re fucking *nothing* to me. You got that?”

Jesus Christ, I’d never been so turned on in my life. It took everything I had to keep my body from trembling as much as Lisa’s had when she’d thought Zach was here to fuck her.

A knock sounded at the door. Zach pulled the key from his pocket before striding over to the side of the bed where Lisa was chained to a slat of the headboard. He popped the lock on her cuff, and it took her half a second to throw herself into his arms.

“You’re throwing away everything we could have for a nasty skank from the Southside!” she wailed, pawing at his shirt. “She’s not the girl you knew, Zach! Why can’t you see it?”

He peeled her off his body with a disgusted look. “That’s enough. Get the fuck out of my Club—you’re no longer welcome here.”

He marched her ass to the door, kicking the heap of fabric on the floor that was her tiny dress out of her reach as they passed by. He opened the door and shoved her into the waiting arms of a Club bouncer, who just nodded respectfully to him before dragging a screaming Lisa down the hallway.

“Zach! *Zach!* I can’t believe you’re choosing her over me! *Zach!*”

As her shrill cries faded away into nothing, Zach slammed the door and stalked back toward me. I met him in the center of the room, jumping into his arms and wrapping my legs around his trim waist. Our lips clashed together, all tongues and teeth, and he snarled at me like an animal before slamming my back up against the wall.

“Fuck, Princess,” he groaned, grinding his hard dick right between my thighs, my thin tights and tiny panties doing little to prevent that delicious friction from driving me higher. “That felt good. I hope you liked your presents.”

“I fucking loved them,” I said, panting. “You’re so—” I moaned as he sucked my earlobe into his mouth. “—thoughtful.”

“Aren’t I?” he rumbled, now dragging his tongue along my collarbone. “You believe I’m on your side now, baby girl?”

Did I? I searched through the lust fog in my brain. Was there still a chance this could all be a game to Zach? Was I an idiot for falling for the guy whose mother had murdered mine?

No. *My* Zach was still in there—the more time we spent together, the more I saw it. We’d been each other’s world once, and we could be that again.

And he’d just handed me one of Ferrero’s biggest partners on a silver platter. If Andrea found out, he could be in danger. The thought made my stomach drop to the floor the same way it had when they’d told me Bennett had been attacked.

Zach was *mine*. I’d protect him, and I’d kill for him.

When I finally said it out loud, it was almost like a prayer. “I believe you, Zach.”

He paused his ministrations to look me right in the eyes, his hands still gripping my ass as he held me up against the wall. “Thank God. You’re my past, present, and future, Jojo. What that means is, this thing you’re doing? I’m all in with you now. Understand?”

“Yes,” I replied, nodding slowly as those deep brown eyes held me captive.

“And I need you to know that what you and I have, you can have with Noah and Bennett, too, if that’s what you want.”

I just continued to nod mutely. There were *so* many things to unpack there, but at the moment, it felt right to acknowledge that even though this was my time with Zach, the four of us were meant to be a unit again, in one way or another.

Then that slow, sexy grin returned. “Good girl. Now, unless you have an objection, Princess, I’m going to fuck you. I’m going to bury myself inside this tight little body I’ve been dreaming about since you told Chad to shove it up his ass on that very first day, and I’m going to make you scream so fucking loud that Kai and the boys are going to hear you all the way down the hall.”

That full body tremble finally overtook me.

“Yes, please.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

JOLIE



Zach pulled me from the wall and marched us into the bathroom. He set me on the white marble countertop and then took a step back, that dark gaze roving over me from head to toe like he was taking in his prize.

"We might want to shower, baby girl," he said silkily as he began unbuttoning my sheer blouse. "Things did get a little messy downstairs."

I looked down at my sleeves, only just noticing the splatter of Donavan's blood on my arms. Zach's white T-shirt also wasn't spared, with little dots of deep red decorating his chest and stomach.

He lost his patience with my buttons.

"Zach!" I barked as he ripped my blouse apart, buttons flying around the bathroom as his hungry eyes took in my lacy black bra.

"Fuck, Princess. These tits."

He buried his face right between them, placing light kisses along my cleavage. His hands worked at my skirt, lifting my butt off the counter to yank it down to my ankles, then he ripped the cups of my bra down, exposing my painfully tight nipples to the cool air of the bathroom.

The tiny knife I'd stuffed in my bra clattered to the floor, but he ignored it.

“Goddamn,” he murmured, taking two seconds to stare at my boobs with reverence before he was on them again, sucking my nipple into his hot mouth.

He growled happily as I moaned. He laved my right nipple before switching to the left, licking and sucking and making pleased little rumbles as he went. I kicked my boots off, then I started pulling at his shirt.

“Off,” I demanded. I wanted to see that hard, muscular body and all those gorgeous tattoos. He’d always worn clothes when we slept together, and I decided that shit ended today.

He released my nipple with an audible pop, then he took a step back to begin slowly—torturously—removing his shirt while he gave me a challenging stare. He tossed it aside, and I ran my ravenous gaze over his broad chest, chiseled abs, and that cut Adonis belt that disappeared into his jeans. His colorful tattoos swirled in geometric patterns across his chest and down both of his biceps, leaking down onto his forearms where they faded into the bare skin of his hands.

“Look your fill, baby girl,” he said as he unbuttoned his jeans. “This is all yours now.”

I hopped down from the counter to strip off the remnants of my clothes, holding his stare with confidence I only sort of felt.

Zach was used to… professionals. I was no shrinking violet, but my experience with sex was limited to a few fumbling encounters with nice, polite boys like Matt Jennings.

I knew without a shred of doubt that Zach was not going to be a nice, polite boy.

“You know, I probably shouldn’t be doing this,” I said, pulling my blouse from my shoulders and tossing it on the floor. He paused to watch me with the barest hint of alarm on his face as I unhooked my bra and let it dangle from a fingertip. “You didn’t want to fuck me when I was Joanna Miller. I wasn’t up to your *standards* then.” I dropped the bra to the floor, then I bent to unhook my knife holster from around my thigh.

“Fuck, you’re hot,” he muttered, sinking his teeth into his lower lip, that sexy lip ring disappearing for a quick second as he watched me remove my knife and set it gently on the counter.

I went on. “Why should I let you fuck me now that you know I’m from the right… *stock?*” I shoved my tights down to my ankles and stepped out of them. I stood up, now clad only in little lacy panties, and I crossed my arms over my tits to give him an accusing stare.

He shucked his jeans before advancing on me, wearing only his tight black boxer briefs. He lifted me, depositing my ass back on the counter, and he stepped between my legs, placing one arm on either side of my body and leaning in until our noses nearly touched.

“First of all,” he purred with a quick nip to my lower lip. “I *absolutely* wanted to fuck you when I thought you were Joanna Miller. I might’ve even let myself have you if you hadn’t gotten hurt because of me.” He reached up to brush my hair behind my ear, then he ran a finger gently over the bumpy little scar hiding under my hair on the side of my head. “But I think you understand by now, Princess, that our *standards* are not about bloodlines and breeding—we’re not banging our classmates, rich or poor. After we turned eighteen, we decided that hooking up with our peers was no longer worth the risk. We’d had a few too many attempts to extort us with… photos. A few too many holes poked in condoms.”

I felt the rage monster descend. “*Who?*”

He flashed me a gorgeous smile. “Taken care of long ago, baby girl. But I love that she-beast you’ve been harboring who seems very protective of her boys. She remembers us.”

“She does,” I grumbled. “She makes me do crazy shit, even for that dick Bennett Spencer.”

Zach snorted, stepping away to crank the water on in the shower. “He’ll get his shit sorted, Princess. He has to figure out how to reconcile his loyalty to Spencer with the fact that he’s obsessed with you. Give him some time.”

I scoffed. “He is not obsessed with me. He’s also engaged.”

Zach waved a dismissive hand. “Semantics.” Then he dropped his boxers straight to his ankles, giving me an eyeful of his round, muscular ass. He peeked at me over his shoulder. “Coming in?”

I watched as he wandered into the shower, the clear frameless glass doing nothing to hide the full view of him as he stood under the waterfall showerhead. The steamy water sluiced down through the

ridges of his torso, and his biceps bunched deliciously as he ran his fingers through his wet black hair.

And, holy shit, he was hard. That was going to be… a tight fit.

His eyes blazed as I approached. I pushed my panties down to my ankles and stepped out of them, then I padded along the cold floor and into the shower, swaying my hips and holding my head high as Zach's dark gaze drank me in.

I made my way into his arms, and he pulled me in for a surprisingly sweet kiss as we stood under the water. That steel pipe between his legs pressed into my stomach, and I ran my fingertips over the defined muscles of his back.

I'd only just begun exploring him with my hands when I found myself pressed against the cool tile wall.

Zach dropped to his knees in front of me. "Let me worship you, Princess," he said, pressing his face right into the apex of my thighs before throwing my leg over his shoulder.

I flushed as he examined me.

"This," he purred, "is a perfect pussy." He ran his tongue through my entire center in one long, languid lick as he stared up at me with those endless brown eyes. "So fucking good, Princess." Another slow lick. "It's too bad Bennett didn't take the time to look at this perfection. He might've realized you were a natural blonde." He nuzzled at my neatly trimmed white-blonde curls before sucking my clit into his mouth.

I moaned, the remaining leg holding me up already beginning to shake. I buried my hands in his wet hair and hung on for dear life as he licked and sucked on my clit, the pressure and the warmth and his happy growls against my sensitive flesh sending me hurtling toward a fast climax.

"Oh fuck," I whined as he sucked harder. "Zach. *Zach*."

"Yeah, baby? Need to come?" A nip to my inner thigh.

"Yes, you bastard," I bit out. "You've been teasing me for *weeks*."

He grinned, then he slipped one thick finger inside of me. "Jesus, Princess. So wet. So perfect." Another finger. "Feel good?"

"Yes," I moaned as he moved his fingers in and out of me slowly. "Oh *shit*."

“I want you to think about how much better my cock is going to feel. You’re going to be so fucking full of me.”

“Yes,” I hissed. “I want it.”

“Soon, baby girl.”

Then my clit was in his mouth again, and he sucked hard as he drove those two fingers into my embarrassingly wet pussy with deep, fast strokes.

Pleasure exploded from my core and shot through my limbs. “Zach, holy fuck, oh my *God*.”

“Fuck yeah,” he growled against my pussy, his fingers working me all the way through the most intense orgasm of my life. “Come on my face, Princess.”

I did. I screamed, still death-gripping his hair, and I came all over his face.

Zach Ferrero—the boy who used to make it his mission to make me laugh at the most inappropriate times, the boy I’d kick with my tiny feet when he encroached on my sleeping space—had just taken me to the stars with his wicked fucking tongue.

I sagged against the wall, held upright by Zach’s shoulder under my thigh and his hands on my ass as he gave me a few final slow licks. Then, in a flash, he was on his feet, his whole body pressed against mine. I threw my arms around his neck, and he buried his face in the crook of my shoulder.

“Baby girl, I was going to dry you off and make passionate love to you in the bed.” His hoarse whisper against my ear had me trembling again. “But I’m not going to make it. I need you now. I’m clean, I promise.”

I tossed a leg up around his hips, opening myself up to him. He groaned as he ran his rock-hard dick through my soaking folds, teasing us both.

“I have an IUD,” I said, my lips right up against his rough cheek. “So you can come inside me.”

Another pained groan escaped him. “Fuck, you’re trying to kill me. I have the bluest balls in the entire fucking world right now, Princess. You can’t say shit like that to me or I won’t last.”

I preened. The knowledge that I had *that* kind of power over one of the hottest men I’d ever laid eyes on was… a trip.

I reached between us, wrapping my hand around where his fist gripped his dick, and I directed him to push inside me.

"Oh *fuck*," he bit out as he slid in, inch by inch, stretching me wide. "Baby girl, this is so tight. So fucking perfect for me—I knew you would be."

The little bite of pain at the size of him mixed with heady pleasure as he bottomed out, and I was exactly what he said I'd be—so fucking full.

"Zach," I moaned, beginning to rock my hips against him as I felt that tight ball of bliss begin to build in my core again. "Fuck me. I will die if you don't start moving."

He chuckled. "Can't have that. Hang on, baby." He hoisted me up again so that both of my legs were locked around his waist, and he slammed my back against the wall, grinding his dick deep inside of me with a roll of his hips, his pelvic bone rubbing right up against my clit. "You're so tight. I need to warm you up before I can give it to you how I want to."

"Stop pretending to be a gentleman," I snapped at him, which turned into a keening sort of whine as he rolled his hips again and again, adjusting the angle just right to grind against my G-spot.

He took my mouth again in a hungry kiss as he worked me harder, and I could feel his stupid, sexy smirk against my lips as I continued to shudder and moan with his every stroke.

"Zach," I whimpered. I was so close.

"I know, Princess. I feel it."

"*Zach*."

Another bruising kiss. "I've got you, baby girl."

Suddenly my feet were on the tile floor as he pulled out, leaving me empty and wanting.

"Zach Ferrero, you better fucking—"

He flipped me around, shoved my face up against the glass wall of the shower, and slammed back inside of me. He dug his fingers into my hip with one hand as he wrapped my long, wet hair around the other like a rope. He pulled it tight, keeping my face pressed against the glass as he pistoned his hips with wild abandon, fucking me fast and hard until I was screaming so loud, I was sure Kai and the boys really could hear me all the way down the hall.

“That’s fucking right, Princess,” Zach bit out, breathing hard with the exertion of *ruining* me. “Scream for me while you come on my cock.”

My orgasm hit me like a freight train. Zach groaned his own release into the back of my neck, and he held me tight as I shook in his arms, the aftershocks pulsing through my body. He kissed my shoulder before he finally pulled out, then he maneuvered us both back under the warm shower.

“That was fucking amazing, baby girl. God, so much better than I could have even dreamed.”

I stretched my sore muscles under the steamy stream, basking in my post-orgasm glow and Zach’s hands as he ran them all over my naked body. “Yeah. That was… wow.”

After a quick soap down, he led me from the shower, wrapped me in a warm towel, and carried me to bed.

When we were both dry and toasty warm, he tucked me under the covers before climbing in next to me.

“Noah let Mari and Max know you’re staying here with me tonight,” he whispered as he wrapped himself around me, both of us still very naked. “I know this is my mom’s home base, but you’re safe with me. I promise.”

“Mmm, I know,” I said, my eyelids drooping. “You’re safe with me too.”

He hummed, kissing my hair before he commanded, “Sleep, Jojo.”

And I did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BENNETT



My father and I ignored each other as we sat in his spacious corner office at James B. Spencer & Associates—the law firm that occupied ten floors of Spencer Tower.

He'd set this meeting with me last week, but he'd also apparently scheduled a conference call at the same hour because *my* time wasn't valuable. So, now I waited, fucking around on my phone as I listened to him make his usual threats and demands disguised as polite negotiations with opposing counsel.

When the call finally ended, he spun in his desk chair to face me, his body framed by the view of the wide black waters of the Obsidian River sparkling in the midday sun forty floors below us.

"Is there a reason you're not fucking your fiancée?"

I glanced up from my phone. "I don't recall that being a requirement of the contract, Father," I replied blandly.

He glared at me, unimpressed as always. "I don't give a shit. I'm tired of Edward Jansen's casual, offhand comments at every event that his daughter is *unhappy* with the current state of your relationship."

"Maybe she should learn to read things before she signs them, then," I said, flicking through my phone again.

He slammed his palm on the top of his desk. "Enough, Bennett. Normally, I'd laugh Edward Jansen out of the room for daring to

complain to *me* about anything, but as you are aware, *son*, the Family is in a more precarious position than usual because of the little Knight bitch." He leaned back in his chair to cross his arms over his chest, the diamonds on his cufflinks glinting at me under the office's harsh fluorescent lights. "And sticking your dick in Harper Jansen is not a hardship. Fit it in between your visits to the Club, for fuck's sake."

I scowled at him. I didn't feel like dignifying that demand with a response.

I did so fucking much for Spencer. I was *engaged* to that obnoxious bitch for Spencer.

I'd watched my best friend *die* for Spencer. And now that she was back, I was aligned against her *for Spencer*.

I went back to aimlessly scrolling on my phone. "Was there anything else you wanted to discuss before I return to school? I have crew practice this afternoon."

He eyed me, pissed off, but he wouldn't yell at me when his assistant was sitting right outside his office door and would be able to hear it. "How are things at the Academy? I'm hearing the girl has a few of the sons and daughters of traitors following her around, but she hasn't made much of an impression otherwise."

My father was getting his Academy gossip from biased sources who were telling him what he wanted to hear. Jolie did have a small number of devoted fans, but the rest of the school was scared shitless of her. Only the likes of Harper, Chad, and their circle remained openly against her.

"That's accurate," I replied, like the question bored me.

"And it seems she is still just using her inheritance to buy bits and pieces off investors she's spooked with her *stories* about the Families. Like she'll be able to rebuild Knight to rival *us* with those crumbs." He scoffed. "The Aviano situation notwithstanding, which only happened because Marcella couldn't keep her fucking legs closed."

I nodded. Zach had played that just right, banking on the fact that Lisa wouldn't reveal that it was *her* behavior that had painted a target on her mom's back. Even if she had, her mom wouldn't have squealed to Andrea about Zach's role in her demise because Andrea

would probably fucking kill her if she showed her face after losing her company in such an idiotic way.

I'd cautioned Zach repeatedly against making such a bold move against Ferrero allies, but I couldn't say I hated the fact that Lisa would no longer be slinking around the halls of the Academy.

"So," I said, attempting to sound only mildly interested, "you think Jolie's not really a threat to Spencer? Not in the long run, anyway?"

He pinned me with that look that said he thought I was the dumbest person to ever speak the English language in front of him. "We did not become what we are by not treating *everything* as a threat to Spencer. She's trying to win a game she has no business playing, but that doesn't mean we're not going to keep a close eye on her." He paused to give me an appraising look, then he said, "And she's stolen something from me I would like returned."

My blood ran cold. "Oh?"

"Yes. She's in possession of a secure flash drive that was stolen from my personal safe."

Actually, Noah was in possession of that drive, and we'd all agreed that was the safest place for it. What my father was doing with Jeffrey Knight's flash drive was a fucking mystery to us, and I did not like how little we knew about it.

I said, "Are you asking me to get it back for you?"

Better me than any number of the dangerous people he had at his disposal.

He waved a dismissive hand. "Anders has convinced me she's not currently a… *threat* to what's on the drive. We'll get it back when the time is right."

Good for Anders for being useful for once in his pathetic life.

"But," he went on, "do keep an eye on her. I know you have been —enough to piss off your fiancée, apparently—so do something worthwhile and get a sense of where she's hiding the drive. And update me if you catch her communicating with anyone of note."

"Yes, sir." Watching Jolie was an assignment I could… handle.

"And," he continued, his voice dropping to its chilliest tone, "you'll report to me anything *concerning*. Remember we're playing nice for the cameras now, but if we have to remind her what happens when you cross the Families like her father did, we will."

I nodded, my mouth dry as I shoved away the terrifying picture of Jolie's frail little body bleeding on the floor in front of me.

"You're dismissed." He turned away, spinning his chair around to face the floor-to-ceiling window behind his desk again, back to gazing out over the river like a king reveling in the enormity of his kingdom. "Get back to school and do your fucking duty to this Family."

I left without another word.



Crew practice was held indoors today, the chilly February rain keeping us from heading out on the water. The men's team spent the first hour on the rowing machines while the women lifted weights, and then we switched places.

As I loaded my barbell, one of my lifting partners—a talented rower from a wealthy outsider family named Hatcher Robicheaux—let out a low whistle, leering in the general direction of the girls.

"It's such a shame. First no one could ask her out because she was declared persona non grata. Now no one can ask her out because she's a fucking *Heir*. It's not fair. Those legs should be illegal."

I glanced at where Jolie was pulling hard on her machine, deep into that methodical focus of hers, while her long, toned legs were on full display because she refused to wear anything but tiny fucking spandex shorts in the gym.

Harper was a few rowers down from her, sans shirt but wearing a faceful of makeup, and I watched as she sneered in Jolie's direction, no doubt having caught my gaze on her once again.

"Man, peel your eyes off the Knight Heir," Hatcher's twin, Hans, said with a rough elbow to his brother's ribs, "before Spencer yanks them out of your head."

Hans was both gay and highly observant, which made him the more tolerable of the Robicheaux twins.

Hatcher shot me a guilty look. "Sorry, dude. I know she's your enemy or whatever, but you have to admit, she's a fucking

smokeshow."

I glared at him. "Quit running your mouth and finish your set."

He gave me a jaunty salute, and Hans chuckled. "Yeah, Hatch. Spencer doesn't want you drooling over her because she's his *enemy*."

My angry glare swung to Hans, letting him know he was one second away from having my hands wrapped around his neck. He raised his own hands in surrender, but not before he gave me a shitty little wink.

Maybe Hans wasn't the more tolerable of the twins.

I returned my focus to my workout, the meeting with my father invading my thoughts. His warnings and threats against Jolie bounced around my head like it was an echo chamber from hell, so by the time I'd finished my workout and showered, I found myself once again haunting the hall outside the girls' locker room, waiting for Jolie.

It was only a few weeks ago that I'd stood in the same spot, still shell-shocked after learning I now had a secret bank account with millions of dollars in it and knowing, deep in my bones, that Jolie was somehow responsible.

A few days ago, I'd used some of that money to buy a condo on the Northside of Olde Town. I gave the key to my mom so she had some place to go to escape the hellhole that was the Spencer penthouse, and since it was owned by a shell company not traceable back to me, I now had an off-the-books place to hunker down if I didn't want to be found.

I'd also put Zach and Noah's names on that bank account, and they both had begun making similar, careful moves to gain a small kernel of freedom from their Families.

Jolie had given that to us, and she didn't even realize how much it meant.

And I'd have given it all back if it meant my father would never discover she had the power to destroy Alastia right under his nose.

After I'd waited a few minutes, Jolie emerged wearing her Holywell Crew sweatshirt, black yoga pants, and her ratty Vans. Her wet hair was braided over one shoulder, and her pale skin was dewy and pink from her shower.

I wanted to tie her to my bed and keep her there—safe and hidden—forever.

Her gaze met mine, and I braced against the wave of nostalgia and pain that slammed into me every time I looked into those ethereal eyes.

“Bennett, we have to stop meeting like this,” she quipped. “Aren’t you going to drag me into a dark corner like a caveman?”

I rolled my eyes, though the urge to do just that so I could put my hands on her even for a minute rode me hard. “Not this time. I would like to speak with you, though.”

She let out a petulant huff, motioning for me to get on with it.

Her sass triggered me, as usual—nobody *sassed* Bennett Spencer—and my control slipped. I pushed into her personal space, and she let me do it. I’d seen her fight, and I knew that if she didn’t want me this close to her—if she didn’t want me dragging her into those *dark corners*—she wouldn’t allow it.

I towered over her, leaning one arm up against the wall next to her head. She crossed her arms and glared up at me, and I enjoyed how little she still seemed next to me at my six-foot-four, even though she was now a very tall girl.

“My father continues to threaten to kill you if this game you’re playing with the Families escalates any further,” I growled at her. “Do not push him, Jolie.”

She barked out an incredulous laugh. “You think this is news to me, Bennett? Take a message back to him—I will kill *him* if he fucking tries.”

I slammed my fist up against the wall. “Why are you so goddamn reckless? This is suicide, Jolie. I will not watch you die *again*, and I won’t let you drag Zach or Noah into danger, either.”

She shoved at me, but I didn’t budge. “Fuck you, asshole. Zach and Noah are big boys who can think for themselves.”

True, but none of us could think straight around her. If I had to be the asshole so I could keep all four of us fucking *alive*, I would do it.

I grabbed her wrists and shoved them against the wall next to her head. She gasped but still did not resist me, and I leaned down so that we were eye to eye, our noses almost touching.

Do not get hard, you weak, pathetic motherfucker.

“Do not come for Spencer,” I growled at her. “I will stand in between you and my father until one of you puts a bullet in my head. That’s a promise.”

She closed her eyes, a pained look crossing her heartbreakingly beautiful face. I felt it when the fight left her body as she sagged against the wall, and God help me, I sagged with her, my fingers threading through hers as our foreheads touched.

“Just trust in me, Bennett,” she whispered. “Believe in what I’m doing because you know, deep down, it’s *right*. Why can’t you do that?”

Before I could force words from my mouth, I heard, “Bennett! What are you doing?”

I stiffened. Harper stalked out of the locker room, wearing nothing but a skintight tank top and shiny pink leggings. Her angry glare landed on Jolie. “Get away from him, you psycho slut!”

I released Jolie and stepped back, knowing this conversation was over and that I’d made zero progress. Jolie dusted herself off before shooting me one last scowl, ignoring Harper.

“Your fiancée needs your attention, Spencer,” she drawled like she didn’t give a shit, but she couldn’t hide that ferocious heat in her eyes.

It was fucking torture.

She marched away, taking a chunk of my heart with her, like always.

I whirled on my fiancée. “I’d appreciate it if you’d refrain from interrupting me when I have business to attend to, Harper,” I said coolly.

Her jaw dropped open before she remembered herself, snapping it shut and pasting a pleasing smile on her face. “Of course, Bennett. It just did not look like that was a very… businesslike conversation. But I know how… rude and frustrating she can be.”

I cocked my head. “Right. It’s too bad she’s not dead at the bottom of the Obsidian, isn’t it?”

Harper sputtered at me, but I was already walking away.



Dinnertime at the dining hall was always a much more subdued affair than breakfast or lunch were during class hours. Students came and went at random times, fewer actually stayed to eat there, and the drama was usually at a minimum.

Noah had gone for a swim after class, so he met me outside the gym and accompanied me to dinner. After grabbing a plate, we made our way toward our usual table at the quiet front of the hall.

Only Noah dropped his plate at the table across the aisle where Jolie sat with Mari Anzaldua, John Tyler Ashmore, and Hannah Langford.

To avoid looking like an antisocial, petulant dick, I sat across from Noah, leaving one solitary, empty seat between Jolie and me.

“Um, hi, guys?” Jolie said, her sandwich paused halfway between her plate and her mouth.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Noah replied smoothly, the shocked looks at the table clearly amusing him. “Cool if we sit here?”

“Knock yourselves out,” she said before shooting a look at Mari, who appeared to be barely holding in her laughter, daring her to make a comment.

Of course it was at that moment that Zach breezed into the dining hall, also fresh from his workout. His dark, wet hair flopped across his forehead, and he wore his usual too-tight white T-shirt.

He had eyes only for Jolie as he picked a burrito from an open food station and made his way toward us.

That asshole had been walking around on cloud nine since his birthday when his mission to make Jolie his girlfriend had apparently succeeded—though he insisted on referring to her only as “our girl” around Noah and me. He was tight-lipped about what went down between them, but I could guess.

It was a weird feeling—to be thrilled for my brother, who was the happiest I’d ever seen him, while also wanting to punch him in his smug fucking face.

“Oh, look, a party,” Zach said as he slid into the chair between Jolie and me. “Hey, Princess. Missed you.”

“Hey,” she murmured back at him, sounding all smitten and demure and so unlike the angry girl I’d just pinned to the wall by the locker rooms.

Maybe I would punch Zach in the face after all.

He placed a hand around the nape of Jolie's delicate neck and pulled her into a possessive kiss. She let out the tiniest little moan, and the sound conjured memories of mine that had my dick hardening in my crew team joggers.

For fuck's sake.

Noah's stare from across the table was full of longing. He was so close to caving and jumping into this poly shit Zach was pushing for, the consequences for Hargraves be damned.

Mari pointed at John Tyler with her fork. "I think you should cough up your pool winnings, amigo. Zach's first in, clearly."

"Totally," Hannah said with a mouthful of food. "Mari and I win this one, JT."

"We never specified they had to be together," John Tyler replied in his usual monotone. "Hargraves made the first move."

What the fuck was all this?

Noah grinned, not embarrassed in the slightest. "It's true. Even Zach will admit it."

Zach chuckled while Jolie blushed like a schoolgirl, which did not help the situation in my pants. Zach said, "I think you guys should just split the pot evenly. I am definitely a proponent of… *everyone* winning."

He nudged me with his elbow, and I shrugged him off.

This was going to come crashing down on us eventually. I just hoped we all survived it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

NOAH



I ’d just shut the door to my office when my phone began buzzing loudly in the pocket of my slacks.

I sighed. I’d really been hoping to get through my afternoon office hours in relative peace—inevitable visit from Annie aside. My father hadn’t bothered me once this week, and we were about to sail into the weekend without any kidnapping attempts or torture sessions, so it was a win all around for the Heirs.

Other than the fact that Bennett had been stomping around like an ogre since Zach’s birthday, hiding his raging jealousy behind his concern for everyone’s safety. He wasn’t wrong—Zach was playing a dangerous game, and there was only so long his mom would believe he was seducing Jolie for the benefit of the Families.

I knew I was going to have to make a similar decision because I was not going to just stand around and watch Zach and Jolie ride off into the sunset together. She was mine as much as she was his, and now that she’d opened herself up to an actual relationship?

I wanted in. Badly.

But I had to figure out how to play it.

Jojo’s flushed face was on my mind—the result of Zach giving her a very public and inappropriate kiss goodbye after Finance this morning before passing her right into my arms. I was remembering

how I'd held her, whispering in her ear exactly how cute she looked at that moment—when I answered my phone.

"Sir." Silver's voice was her usual calm, but there was an undertone of urgency there that I noticed immediately. "The board members of Hargraves Technologies conducted a clandestine meeting one hour ago in which they voted unanimously to remove Peter Hargraves as Chairman of the Board and CEO of the company."

"Shit," I swore.

"There's more," she continued, her long fingernails clacking away at her keyboard in the background. "They elected a new Chairman of the Board and CEO within the same ten-minute span."

Don't say it.

"Jolie Knight is now the head of Hargraves Technologies, with the power to unilaterally appoint new board members."

"Fuck." I collapsed into my chair, and I removed my glasses so that I could pinch the bridge of my nose like that could stop the oncoming headache. "How did she do it?"

"Best we can tell? Blackmail."

That would do it. Everyone sitting on the board of a Family company had a skeleton hidden somewhere, and somehow Jojo had found them.

Silver continued. "She had more on these people than even *we* did. They're shitting their pants. I have to think she's got a much bigger apparatus behind her than we know."

"I agree," I replied. It was still the biggest fucking mystery about her reappearance.

"The board members have all resigned, and we found three of them on the passenger manifests for international flights leaving tonight."

"Cowards," I muttered.

"And," she went on, "we received notice of a meeting of the new board of Hargraves Technologies. As in, through our private back channels, to this team specifically. The notice is to you, sir."

I sat forward. "I'm formally invited to a meeting of the new board of directors of Hargraves Technologies?"

“It appears so. You have half an hour to get your butt to Knight Tower.”

“Shit. Who else knows?”

More clicking of keys. “As far as we can tell, no one outside the ex-board members. We’re monitoring their cell phones and emails, and no one has yet tried to reach your father.”

I stood up, throwing on my messenger bag as I held my phone between my ear and my shoulder. I grabbed the 9mm I kept stashed in my desk drawer and tucked it into the inner pocket of my suit jacket.

“Monitor all entries and exits into Knight Tower, specifically the floors where Hargraves Tech sits,” I instructed. “And continue to monitor all board members’ communications as well as my dad’s. Keep me updated if this blows up before we can get a handle on what Jolie has planned.”

“On it. Be safe.”

I rushed out the door, typing a quick message to Bennett and Zach to inform them where I was headed and to be on standby if shit went down.

What have you done now, Jolie?



Twenty minutes later, I strode through the door to the main conference room of Hargraves Technologies, located in the heart of Knight Tower. This most profitable piece of the Hargraves empire used to belong to the Knight Family, after all.

I found Jolie there, standing at the head of the sleek, modern conference table that stretched the length of the room. Dominic Miller and Max both stood like sentries behind her, dressed in black and strapped to the hilt with weapons. I presumed the others seated around the table were her new board of directors.

Jolie in her boardroom outfit was a sight that almost knocked the wind out of me. She wore tailored black pants that cinched at her trim waist, and her silky purple blouse reminded me of the fierce eyes of her alter ego, Joanna. She’d pulled her blonde hair into a low

ponytail, and she'd painted her lips a dark blood red. She radiated poise, confidence, and power, and I just wanted to stand here and soak it up forever.

"Noah, welcome," she said with a genuine smile, though a hint of nerves peeked through. "Have a seat."

I took the opposite head of the table. I was still Noah Hargraves, even if she'd just stolen this company right out from under my Family.

"Jolie," I replied, my tone reproachful. "What's all this?"

"I take it your team updated you on what's happened here?"

I nodded. "They did. You've scared off my father's board of directors and booted him out of his own company."

Those gorgeous eyes narrowed. "This," she said in a low rasp, "is *my* company. Your father stole it from my Family after he participated in their murder."

I raised my hands in surrender because she was absolutely correct. "I'm aware. Did you invite me here to rub it in?"

She crossed her arms, surveying the room like the regal queen she was. "No. You're here because you are the fifth member of the new board of directors of this company. And we're about to hold an important vote."

It was my turn to frown at her. "What?"

She motioned to the others seated at the table. "You know Hannah Langford and Devin Kelly, of course." I did—two classmates of ours from old Knight-allied families that were still deeply involved in the City's tech industry. "And this is Devin's uncle, Joshua Kelly." She pointed at the smiling man in his fifties with a graying goatee and a ponytail. His biotech company was the crown jewel in the Langford portfolio, and they were both apparently defecting from Spencer with this show of fealty to Knight.

"And me?" I asked. "You're appointing me to the board?"

"I am." She held my stare, the intensity in those aquamarines imploring me—*pleading* with me—to understand.

I did.

She held up a thick legal document. "We're entertaining a generous offer by Knight Acquisitions to purchase 100 percent of the

stock of Hargraves Technology and all subsidiaries. The vote begins now."

There it was. Jolie was here to take back this part of her legacy, to strip it away from my father, and there was nothing he could do about it from where he sat in Belize or wherever the fuck he was right now.

"I vote yes," Hannah said, tossing me a wink.

Devin was next. "I vote yes."

"I absolutely think this is the right direction for our company," Joshua Kelly said with a theatrical flourish of his hand, "so I vote yes."

"And, of course," Jolie said, her eyes meeting mine again, "I vote yes."

She had the majority. She didn't need my vote. She was giving me a seat at the table anyway, and I had the out to vote "no" and save face with my father while still being involved in the company that had been my Family's for seven and a half years.

I gave my girl a smile that I hoped conveyed even a fraction of what I felt for her. I was in awe of her, and there was nothing I wouldn't do for her now and forever—she only had to ask.

"I vote yes."

She beamed at me as applause broke out.

My phone blared in my pocket.

SLVR: HG ENFORCERS DISPATCHED BY PH INCOMING. PREPARE TO ENGAGE

I dropped my phone onto the table, and my frantic gaze slammed into Dominic Miller's.

He'd already tensed, reading on my face what was coming. "Barricade them all in the bathroom," he barked at Max. "*Now*."

Max and Jolie both jumped into action, and they'd just shoved Hannah into the large connected bathroom behind the other two board members and slammed its heavy door when a bullet shattered the glass wall of the conference room.

"Get down!" Dom shouted.

He and Max flipped the long conference table on its side, the two of them dropping to the floor, and Jolie dove behind it one second later.

“Noah!” she screamed.

I’d already rolled to the side wall of the conference room, coming to a stop near the front. I pulled the chair I’d been sitting in over my head to shield my body from the shards of glass that rained down over the room.

My stomach was in my throat, and not in fear for my own safety. These bullets weren’t for me—they were here for Jolie.

She’d finally struck at the Families—at Hargraves—right where it would hurt the most, and my dad had apparently decided to use deadly force to prevent her from taking this company from him—no matter the fallout.

Four Enforcers entered, broken glass crunching under their heavy combat boots as they waded into the room, their standard semi-automatic pistols held aloft. “Everyone, freeze!”

Dom popped up and fired a shot at the leader Enforcer, burying the round in his shoulder. He stumbled, his gun discharging at the ceiling, and Dom used that small moment of chaos to fire another round right into his head. His lifeless body dropped to the floor.

“Mr. Hargraves!” one of the remaining Enforcers said as he spotted me against the wall behind my chair and rushed toward me. “Sir, we didn’t know you were in here! I’ll cover you—head for the exit!”

I didn’t move, choosing instead to remain crouched under my chair as I watched the other two Enforcers advance on Jolie’s hiding spot with renewed urgency. I pulled my gun from my jacket, ready to end both of them, but the Enforcer running toward me was in my line of sight.

As they reached the table, Max jumped out, knocking the gun from the hand of one Enforcer as he tackled him to the ground. Dom fired on the other one, and as the Enforcer turned to dodge the bullet, Jolie flew from her hiding spot, vaulting over the table and wrestling him to the ground.

“Sir! We have to go!” the last guy shouted over more gunshots as he reached me, and it was now or never.

I threw the chair at him. His arms flew up to shield his face, and I swept his legs from under him. He hit the floor, his gun flying from his hand and clattering to the ground next to us. I jumped on top of him,

pinning his arms to the ground with my knees, and I slammed the butt of my gun into his temple.

“Jolie!” I shouted as the guy went slack underneath me, my heart hammering.

“I’m okay, Noah!”

She stood from where she’d been crouched behind Dom and Max, smoothing her blouse and tucking her gun into the waistband of her pants. Three bodies lay on the floor in front of them, the blood from their fatal wounds pooling on the shiny tile floor.

I heaved a sigh of relief as I climbed off my unconscious Enforcer, then I kicked him onto his stomach before rummaging in his utility belt for the zip tie handcuffs I knew all Family Enforcers carried. Locating them, I cinched his hands together behind his back just in case he woke up and decided to start shit.

As Dom and Max went to let the rest of the new board of directors of Hargraves Tech out of the bathroom, I met Jolie’s tired, determined gaze.

“I guess someone squealed to Peter?” she asked with a wry grin.

I ran my hand through my hair. “Looks like it.”

“That would be me.”

The deep rasp sounded from behind me out in the now deserted lobby. I whirled, raising my gun as Jolie, Dom, and Max did the same, but I found myself facing down the barrel of a shiny black Glock as a stocky, bearded man in his forties that I vaguely recognized stepped into the room.

“Drop your weapons, or I’ll blow this traitorous little shit’s brains all over the wall.”

“Don’t do it, Jolie,” I bit out as I lowered my arms to my sides. She was the one he was here for, and I wouldn’t let her stand there unprotected.

“Easy there, Richard,” Jolie said from behind me. “I’m not sure this is going to go how you think it will.”

Ah, Richard Kincaid. Now former board member of Hargraves Tech, a cusp family just bordering on Tier One status.

Here to save the day for my father.

He let out a maniacal laugh. Great, he was crazy. “It’s the end of the line for you, bitch. The rest of the board members might be

sniveling little cowards, but I'm not afraid of you. Didn't count on me using the Enforcers stationed in your own fucking Tower to get a secret message to Peter that quickly, did you?"

Crazy, but apparently not dumb. My team had caught it, but not in time.

"And now, you're all going to stand right there and behave while little Hargraves here uses his phone to summon backup to put you down once and for all. Then maybe I'll let him live and forget to tell Daddy he's so pussy-drunk that he betrayed his own Family."

I stood there, keeping a calm air as best I could while also giving him a derisive look. "Richard, you're holding a gun on an Heir. Are you sure you want to be doing that?"

"Noah," Jolie said, her voice almost serene, "do you want to know what Mr. Kincaid here has been hiding? I'm not sure even a shitbag like Peter would've let him remain on the board of his most profitable company had he known."

"Shut up, bitch," he barked at her.

"Hey," I snapped at him. "Don't you fucking look at her. You look at me."

He scoffed, waving his gun in my face as Jolie went on. "Richard tragically lost his wife while on a big game hunting trip in Africa last year. The local authorities ruled it an accident, and he collected quite the hefty payout from her life insurance. Enough to make a huge investment in this company, right, Richard?"

"Shut *up*," he shouted.

"But it turns out the consular authorities thought her death was pretty suspicious. She wasn't cleaning a rifle that misfired, was she, Richard? She was shot from behind from six feet away. Cost you a pretty penny to get that well and truly buried, didn't it? But unfortunately for you, James Spencer keeps some *interesting* documents in his safe."

I'd known that the people my Family involved itself with were often shady. My team had collected dirt on many of them, and if there was something I needed to know about someone, I did. But I didn't know everything, and sometimes it was easier to pretend the people I interacted with at every gala, dinner party, and event weren't complete pieces of shit devoid of any sort of moral code.

But now I was hearing the truth about just *one* of the people who my father had put in charge of this piece of Jolie's legacy, and it made me fucking sick.

Richard Kincaid had also endangered Jolie's life, and that made me fucking angry.

The hand that held the gun in my face was shaking—Richard apparently did not like being reminded of his depravity—and his crazed, livid glare darted to Jolie once again.

I took the opening.

I lunged for his gun, raising both my hands and locking his arm between them. I shoved his gun from his grip with my palm before twisting his arm around. Hand-to-hand combat wasn't my strength—that was Zach and Bennett, while I was the marksman—but I was still adept enough to take this short, overweight asshole to the ground.

"Fuck!" he shouted as his gun slid away and his body hit the floor.

Jolie and Max rushed over. Jolie scooped the gun from the floor, disengaged the magazine, then tossed it to Dom where he stood guard in front of the other three new board members who watched this all go down with pale, shocked faces.

Richard struggled under me, but he froze when he felt Max's gun pressed to his head.

"Chill out, bro," Max said, smirking. "You lost this one." He looked at me, those dark eyes dancing like we hadn't all just been in a life-or-death situation. "Nice work there, Noel. Maybe you're worthy of my sister after all."

"Max, quit it," Jolie huffed, holding her hand out to me.

I grabbed it, pulling myself to my feet before gathering her into my arms. "You okay, sweetheart? Any injuries?"

"I'm fine, I promise," she whispered, bringing her hands up to cup the sides of my face. "Are you okay? I hadn't intended for you to have to declare war against your father with quite the… body count."

I chuckled. I didn't deserve her, but she was mine. "I'm where I belong now, Jojo. Back with you, us against the world." I kissed her, soft and sweet and full of promises for later, and she melted in my arms.

Good girl.

After I was satisfied I'd kissed my girl thoroughly, I pulled away to look down at the trash on the floor. He was still seething but stuck with a gun pressed to his skull. "Step back for a second," I said to Max as I pulled my own gun from my suit jacket again.

I aimed it at Richard's head.

"I'll make sure my father receives the security footage from this room," I said with a smile, "so he can see firsthand what happens when someone tries to hurt Jolie Knight."

I fired a bullet between his eyes.

"Damn, alright, Hargraves," Max murmured.

I ignored him. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of letting him know I was pleased to have impressed him. I pulled Jolie into my side. "I'll get Zach's cleanup crew on this. He's got one on his own payroll now, thanks to you."

"Okay," she said, blowing out a breath and laying her head on my shoulder. "Let's all sign the purchase agreement and get the fuck out of here."

Hannah huffed from the corner of the room. "Yes, *let's*. I guess we should have known bringing Knight back was going to be… exciting."

Devin clutched her uncle, both of them looking rattled, but we all scrawled our signatures quickly on the deal document before Jolie tucked it into her purse.

I kissed Jolie again, long and slow, ignoring Max's exaggerated eye roll. "I'll get this cleaned up and come see you later, okay?"

She nodded, her cheeks turning that delicious, satisfying pink that only Zach and I could elicit, before she gathered her family and her new board members and ushered them out into the lobby.

My phone buzzed loudly with an incoming call, and I pulled it from my pocket.

A video call from my dad.

I hit Ignore, then I began cleaning up the mess he'd made at *my* new company so that I could get back home to my girl.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JOLIE



"Fuck, I never want to feel that helpless again, Princess."

Zach held me in my bed, both of us now showered and in our pajamas. I buried my face in his chest to inhale his citrusy scent. "You want to join Dom and Max as part of my guard?" I asked, teasing. "Andrea would love it."

"That's a great idea," he replied in all seriousness. "Max could use a lesson on quick, efficient kills."

That was false, but I'd let Zach think he was the superior warrior for now. I hadn't known that Noah's team had hacked into the security cameras in that conference room and looped in both Zach and Bennett, but apparently the two of them had watched almost the entire debacle from their phones. Expecting corporate shenanigans, they'd gotten a gunfight, but it had been over before they had been able to decide whether to ride to the rescue.

It had shaken Zach up enough that I hadn't been back in my bedroom in A Dorm for three minutes before he'd burst inside, pinned me to the bed, and fucked me long and slow on the top of my comforter until I was a trembling mess. His eyes had never left mine, and he'd brought me to a toe-curling climax before I could even wash the blood off my hands.

"Did you hear from Noah?" I asked him.

“Yeah. Everything’s cleaned up, and it’ll be business as usual tomorrow. He should be home any minute.”

I hoped so. I needed him. He’d done so much for me today, at great personal risk, and I needed to see him—to *feel* him—to make sure he was safe.

“Zach,” I whispered.

“Yeah, baby?”

“Are you and Noah going to be okay?”

He hummed into my hair. “You need to remember, Princess, that none of us were really *okay* before you came back. We were just surviving, taking tiny little pieces of freedom where we could, and biding our time until we decided what we wanted to do about… everything. But now that you’re back, there’s only one thing that really matters anymore. We’ll figure out how to handle whatever is thrown at us, as long as we stay together.”

My bedroom door creaked open, and a familiar figure crept into the room, his blond hair shining in the faint glow of the City lights outside my window.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Noah whispered as he approached my side of the bed. “Still awake?”

“Yes,” I murmured, rolling in Zach’s arms to face him. “How’d you get in here? Did Zach give you the code?”

Noah grinned. “Of course not. I earned my way in here with my superior skills, same as he did.”

“Stop bragging and get the fuck in bed,” Zach grumbled into my shoulder. “Princess was worried about you.”

“Gladly,” Noah said, kicking off his shoes and placing his glasses on my nightstand. He wore a soft gray V-neck shirt and flannel pajama pants, and his hair was still damp from his shower, so he was now washed clean of the blood and sweat of our earlier adventures.

He slid under the covers and plastered himself to my front, while Zach remained wrapped around my backside like a warm, muscular koala. Noah placed a hand on my cheek, his long fingers caressing my skin and his thumb rubbing light circles over my freckles.

“God, I fucking missed these,” he whispered, his tone almost awed. “Sometimes I still think I’m dreaming.”

“Same, dude,” Zach grunted.

“I wanted to come to you guys so many times in those first few years,” I admitted quietly. “Then I let my anger take over. I never thought I could have this again.”

“You have us, sweetheart,” Noah replied. He pressed his lips to mine, and I sighed happily. I felt the cold bite of Zach’s lip ring on the back of my neck where he pressed a few soft kisses to my now heated skin.

I squirmed, the ache already building between my thighs.

“Woah there, Hargraves,” Zach said, chuckling. “Princess is tired. Everyone needs to sleep, so don’t get her worked up right now.”

I elbowed him. “You’re not the boss of us, Ferrero.”

“Zach’s right,” Noah said, dropping one last quick kiss on my lips before tucking my face into his solid chest. “Sleep, sweetheart. We’ll be here in the morning.”

I’d have put up more of a fight if my crashing adrenaline hadn’t already started to drag me under. I slept, pressed between them, and I dreamt of the *three* smiling boys who had once been my whole world.



I woke the next morning, tangled up in boys, and I didn’t hate it.

I extracted myself from Zach and Noah’s sleepy embrace, and I snuck to the bathroom to do my business and brush my teeth. I checked my phone for news, confirming with Zepp that Hargraves was keeping the news of the loss of their most profitable company quiet for now and that our press release was ready to go on Monday.

When I returned to bed, I found the guys awake and whispering to each other across the empty space I’d vacated between them. I climbed over Noah and back into my spot because it was Saturday and no one was shooting at me, so I wanted to relax.

“Morning, Princess,” Zach said in his sexy, sleep-drenched baritone. He pulled me in for a good-morning kiss that quickly turned possessive and dirty.

“Hey,” Noah griped. “Share.”

Zach chuckled into the kiss before pulling away and slipping from the bed. “I’m going to take Bennett to the gym and let him throw some punches at me like I know he’s been dying to.”

“You’re leaving?” I asked, and there went my lower lip into a ridiculous pout again.

Zach leaned back over the bed to nip at my lip with a growl, then he stood up, groaning and adjusting himself in his pajama pants. “Trust me, baby girl. I know I speak for Noah when I say that the two of us are very much looking forward to working you over *together* in the near future”—I moaned into my pillow—“but you both deserve this time with each other. So, I am going to go distract His Royal Highness while you two… hang out.”

Noah pulled me into his arms. “Thanks, buddy. Don’t fuck up Bennett’s face—it upsets Jojo.”

Zach saluted him as he pulled his long-sleeved shirt on over his ripped, naked torso. I’d banned him from wearing shirts in my bed, and he was all too happy to comply. “Later, lovebirds.” He shut the door with a soft click, then Noah and I were alone in my bed.

I rolled over to face him. Our noses almost touched, and I lost myself in his deep blue eyes—still sans glasses, giving his face a youthful softness that reminded me of my Noah from long ago.

He pressed a kiss to my nose. “I know Zach was throwing around a bunch of innuendo just now with the subtlety of a moose, but there’s no pressure here, sweetheart. I just want to make sure you know I’m in this now. I want to be with you.”

I gave him a soft smile. I felt like I was floating on a cloud. “You want to be my boyfriend, Noah?”

“Absolutely.”

“You’re cool with my other boyfriend hanging around?”

He snorted. “He’s alright, I guess. There’s no one better suited to keep him in line than you, anyway.” He placed a kiss on my forehead as his fingers danced along the bare skin of my back between the straps of my silky tank top. “So, how about it?”

I pulled him in for a real kiss—no more of this sweet, chaste shit. I licked at the seam of his lips, and he opened immediately with a little groan. We devoured each other, and I felt the growing hardness in his pants where it was pressed against my hip.

“I say yes, Noah,” I gasped as we broke apart, both of us now breathing hard. “And I want you now. Please.”

He rolled me to my back in a sudden move that caught me off guard. As my head hit the pillow, Noah was already on top of me, straddling my hips as he peered down at me with heat in those blue eyes that took my breath away.

“Sweetheart, I’ll give you anything you want,” he said silkily before he reached over to grab his dark-framed glasses off the nightstand and slid them onto his face. “Especially when you ask so nicely.”

He ran his hands down my body, taking me in with renewed interest now that he could see me in high definition. My nipples were diamond points under my little tank top, and my matching shorts had ridden up so high, they were practically panties now. He swiped his thumbs reverently over my nipples before dipping down to run his tongue across one of them, right over the silk of my shirt.

I whimpered as he pulled away.

“I know, sweet girl,” he whispered. “But I want to take my time exploring this delicious body. I’ve been dreaming about it for so long now.”

“Okay, but Noah—”

“Put your hands above your head for me,” he said, his tone still soft but now taking a stern edge.

I did as he asked.

He leaned down to kiss me. “Good girl.”

I shivered. “Did my sweet, lovely Noah grow up to be… a little bossy in the bedroom?”

He just chuckled as he pulled my tank top over my head, dragging it up my arms. I started to pull my hands down to help him remove it when he grabbed my wrists with one strong hand. “Don’t move.”

“Noah,” I whined.

He beamed that beautiful smile down at me as he finally dislodged my shirt and tossed it away. “God, look how fucking gorgeous you are. You’re going to let me explore this beautiful body with my tongue, aren’t you, sweetheart?”

Holy fuck, I was going to implode. “Yes,” I replied, swallowing hard.

“That’s what I like to hear. Hold onto the headboard, please.”

I gripped the slats above my head with the determination of a woman on a mission.

He went back to running his hands down my body, studying me intently as he cupped my breasts and ran his thumbs over my nipples again. He dragged his fingertips down the taut hollow of my stomach, then he grabbed the waistband of my shorts and peeled them down my legs in one smooth motion.

“No panties? You’re going to kill me, sweetheart,” he said with a groan. “Jesus, look at you.”

I was now totally naked, spread out under a still-clothed Noah as he straddled my thighs. His face was flushed, those blue eyes hungry behind his sexy glasses. He smelled like clean laundry, and his hair was still a little unruly from sleep. His dick was hard, pitching a considerable tent in his flannel pants.

My blood was on fire. I wanted him so badly.

“Noah,” I murmured, giving him my biggest doe eyes. “Please.”

He bit his plump lip as he looked down at me. “Fuck.”

He dove in to take my lips with his, his hands planted on either side of my outstretched arms as he consumed me. I moaned against his mouth, itching to touch him—to run my fingers through his silky hair as we kissed—but I held tight to the headboard.

Don’t stop, Noah.

He moved south, dragging his lips down my neck before peppering kisses over my collarbone and down my chest. He finally—mercifully—wrapped those lips around my nipple while his nimble fingers worked the other.

“Noah,” I moaned. It felt so good, but I needed more.

“I know, sweetheart,” he replied, laving my other nipple with his tongue. “You’re being so good. I promise I’ll take care of you.”

He sat up again and stripped his shirt off, tossing it on the floor. I took in every inch of his tanned skin, the smooth, defined muscles of his chest and stomach, and the light dusting of blond hair that ran down from his belly button and disappeared into his pants.

“Not quite as impressive or colorful as your other boyfriend,” he said with a wry chuckle, motioning to his body. “But I try.”

I gaped at him. “Noah, you’re *beautiful*.”

He gave me that gorgeous smile. “And I’m yours, Jojo.”

I gasped as he bent down to lick a stripe from one hipbone to the other, then he spread my legs wide. He sank his teeth into my inner thigh, and my pussy clenched.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?” he murmured against my skin, his mouth so close to where I needed it.

“Yes,” I panted. “Please, Noah.”

“Then hold on tight.”

He knelt between my legs and scooped me up, throwing my legs over his shoulders as his long fingers wrapped around my ass. He brought me to his mouth like a man dying of thirst in the desert who’d stumbled onto a spring. My hips were in the air, my thighs wrapped around his head, and I let out a long, low moan as he sank his tongue inside of me.

“Fuck!” I cried.

Noah groaned against me, taking long, languid licks through my folds before wrapping his lips around my clit and sucking hard. He stayed there, working my clit with hard sucks and enthusiastic licks until my orgasm crested.

“Noah, I’m gonna come,” I whined, now white-knuckling the headboard slats above me. “Oh shit. Oh my God.”

He growled, sucking on my clit with renewed vigor and sliding a finger inside me.

“Come for me, sweetheart. I want to hear it. I want to feel it on my face.”

Jesus, even *Noah* had grown up to be a dirty talker.

The dam broke and I came hard, my scream bouncing off the walls and the bed shaking underneath me as Noah drove me over the edge with the pressure of his tongue and the forceful thrusts of his fingers.

“Mmm,” he hummed as I came down, giving me a few last passes of his tongue before he dropped my ass back onto the bed. “That was so hot. Fucking perfection.”

I could only lay there in my post-climax daze, happy and sated but wanting more.

“Noah,” I murmured.

“Yes?” He crawled up my body and reached to pull my hands from the headboard.

“Your dick, please.”

He laughed. “Coming right up.”

He maneuvered himself out of his pants, and I was treated to a view of his very pretty dick and his lean, muscular thighs. Noah wasn’t as thick as Zach, but he was longer and had a bit of a curve to him, and I couldn’t wait to learn how he felt inside of me.

Kneeling again between my legs, he brought his tip to my entrance. “You ready, sweetheart? I want your hands on me now.”

Yes. “Fuck me, Noah,” I purred. “I’m covered.”

He looked at me, his eyes burning with lust. “I’m going to fuck you so good, sweet girl. And I’m clean. None of us have ever gone without protection before, for extremely obvious reasons. We were waiting for you, I think.”

“I’ve been waiting for *you*. Put your dick in me,” I demanded.

He swatted my thigh, right near my ass. “Behave, baby. I’m savoring this.” Then he finally began to push inside of me, and he slid in easily, his earlier ministrations doing everything to pave the way. “Fuck,” he groaned. “This is heaven.”

He leaned in to kiss me, so sweetly, and I ran my hands through his hair and up and down his toned back, drinking him all in as he began to move between my legs.

We held each other, our lips locked together and Noah swallowing my every cry as he thrust into me, his hips snapping against my ass and his pelvic bone rubbing my clit with each move. He increased his pace, taking me higher, until finally I felt my muscles lock around him as another orgasm erupted through my entire body.

“Holy hell, sweetheart,” Noah groaned, now burying his face in the crook of my neck as he pushed me through my climax. “Such a good girl. Choking the life out of my cock. Fuck.”

He shuddered, his release hitting just as mine began to ebb, and he collapsed onto the bed next to me with a satisfied sigh.

I rolled into his arms, and he held me close as we both caught our breaths.

“Hey, Noah,” I said after a few comfortable minutes of silence. “Did you know your butler is stealing from you?”

He barked out a laugh. “I did, actually. I hold it over his head so he keeps out of my business. But how did you know about that?”

I smirked, pressing a kiss behind his ear. “I know all kinds of shit. Be glad you haven’t also been into Buckley’s disgusting porn history.”

“I’d fire him, but… he’s not really my butler anymore, is he?” Noah mused. “I doubt I’ll be welcome back in Hargraves Tower. My dad can make that decree even from Fiji or wherever the fuck he’s hiding.”

I squeezed him tighter. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

He grinned, and I felt him begin to harden against me again. “I’ve never been better, sweetheart. Trust me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JOLIE



I woke Monday morning with Noah's face pressed into the crook of my neck and the space behind me still warm where Zach had slept.

The weekend had passed under a precarious sort of quiet. I'd been forced to throw myself into homework, since I couldn't forget that I was still attending one of the most rigorous collegiate academies in the country while I was destroying the Families.

Zach and Noah had been doing the same, balancing the intense course load with the delicate dance they were doing with their parents, and they'd each collapsed into my bed in the late hours of the last two nights with a few sweet kisses for me before they'd passed out.

After I'd gotten frustrated during hour three of my Finance homework last night, I'd gone to the gym to blow off steam, so I was skipping my early workout to snuggle with Noah before class started. I missed Zach, but he'd run off earlier to supervise Bennett's morning gym time. As much as Bennett frustrated me, seeing how the three of them still took care of each other after all these years made me feel warm and gooey inside.

"So, my team unearthed something last night," Noah said as he lazed in my bed, his hot gaze following me eagerly as I moved around the room while getting dressed.

“What’s that?” I bent over to shimmy into my soft leather leggings, making sure he got a good look at my ass as I did it.

A pause. “What?”

“Your team found something?”

He bit his lip before he tore his eyes from my butt. “Right. Now that we’re being a bit more… aggressive about our digging around, we targeted the Knight servers for suspicious activity immediately after your parents were killed. Like, the activity from the very next morning—we noticed something we’d missed before.”

I pulled my loose burgundy sweater over the soft tank top I wore, then I paused to look at him. “They were looking for the encryption key.”

He nodded. “The access point appeared to be the Knight penthouse, and whoever was digging went deliberately to a file your dad had hidden on his private server—the one he and his small research team used. If we weren’t looking specifically for a possible encryption key for a KnightKey500, we might not have identified it, but the sequence that was pulled from your dad’s server doesn’t unlock his drive.”

“You tried it?”

“I did.” He tossed the covers off his body, treating me to a nice view of his shapely, tanned legs in his boxer briefs, then he went hunting for his pants. “That’s why I was late coming down here last night. I was hoping for good news for you. I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

I finished pulling on my new favorite boots before I stood and enveloped him in a hug. “It’s better this way, Noah. I don’t think we’d have wanted whoever was sniffing around my dad’s stuff to have gotten their hands on the right key. It was definitely James Spencer, or at least someone doing it at his behest.”

He kissed my neck. “You’re right. Maybe it’s for the best the key was lost.”

I reached for his discarded shirt at the foot of my bed and shoved it into his hands. “Get dressed, boyfriend. I want a full breakfast before class.”

Loud pounding sounded against my bedroom door before Mari’s muffled voice floated through. “Me too! Keep it in your pants, Hargraves, because I’m starving!”

Noah sighed. “I miss the time when she was scared of me like the rest of the school.”

She cackled out in the hallway. “That was before my best friend started keeping your cojones in her purse!”

He groaned. I smacked a kiss to his lips before I said, “Cheer up, baby. Of all the awesome things I keep in my purse, your balls are my favorite.”



While Noah popped upstairs to the Heir suite to put his suit on and Mari shut herself in her room to call Carmen, I sat at our small kitchen table and checked in with my team.

“Boss lady, you are savage,” Zepp said as he joined the call. “And apparently so is the little Hargraves prince.”

“Whatever,” Max drawled. “He shot a guy laying on the floor who had another gun to his head. Big fucking whoop.”

“He put that bullet exactly between Kincaid’s eyes, Max,” Dom replied. “That’s some skill.”

“Can we focus, please?” I griped, giving the three of them my best stern boss voice. “It was great taking a huge bite out of Hargraves and escaping death and all, but we need to move quickly on our next target. They’re going to stop underestimating us eventually.”

“It’s in the works, my queen,” Zepp said with his usual snark. “The more hits the Families take, the more vulnerable they are in the public eye and to their investors. I think with just a few more pushes, we’ll be ready.”

“Great.”

Dom added, “You need to continue to watch your back, please. We’re keeping eyes on the perimeter of the Academy, as always, but I’d prefer if you had a capable escort if you leave campus.”

“That would be me,” Max said.

“You know, Zach and Noah are pretty capable too,” I replied, very casually.

Max's scoff reverberated through my earbuds. "Sure, if you want to downgrade your security to pretty boys with questionable loyalties, Jojo."

Someday the men in my life would all get along, but today was not that day.

"I'll be fine. Zepp, keep me up to date on progress. Meeting adjourned."

We said our goodbyes, and I'd just shoved my phone into my back pocket when it started buzzing with another incoming call to my secure line.

"Uncle Anders?" I said as I swiped the screen to answer. "Are you in trouble?"

"Oh, no, no," he said quickly. His rapid breathing and the ambient noise of traffic told me he was out walking somewhere in the City. "I really just wanted to make sure *you* weren't in trouble. That was a dangerous thing you did to Peter Hargraves, Jolie."

"It was a more dangerous thing he did to *me*, Uncle," I replied, my words biting. "I'm just righting the wrongs done to *our* Family."

"I… yes, I realize," he huffed. A car horn blared in the background. "And of course, it is nice to have two-thirds of Knight Tower back with… us. But Jolie, even with your *vast* inheritance at your disposal, I'm not sure you have the power to take on all three of the remaining Families. I know that's what you're planning."

I took a calming breath. This was my uncle worried about my safety, not the elite assholes I had to interact with daily doubting me yet again. "I have more power behind me than anyone realizes, Uncle. I appreciate your concern, but you should focus on keeping a low profile and off James Spencer's radar."

"What do you mean, you have more power behind you than anyone realizes? What—" He cursed. "Sorry, tripped on the curb. Did you… did you find something on your dad's drive?"

"What? No."

"Help me out here, Jolie," he said, almost whining. "Help me understand how this is not a suicide mission."

Not today. "Maybe it is, Uncle. But it's my decision. I've got to get to breakfast before class. Talk to you later."

"Jolie—"

I hung up as a knock sounded at the door. I cracked it open to find both of my handsome boyfriends dressed in their suits—or in Zach's case, half a suit—along with one tall, brooding plus-one lingering near the elevator.

I pushed the door open wide, beckoning them inside. "Hi, boys."

"Hey, Princess." Zach waltzed in and promptly pinned me to the wall by the door with his hard body. "You look delicious today." He kissed me, swallowing my tiny moan.

"Ease up, Ferrero," Noah said as he entered behind Zach. "Our girl wants breakfast before class, and I have a surprise for her. We gotta go."

Before I could interrogate Noah about this *surprise*, Mari appeared from her room, click-clacking across the hardwood floor in some monster peep-toe heels. "Oh, do my eyes deceive me? Are the Heirs of the Four Families standing in my dorm during daylight hours after being let inside instead of breaking in like common criminals?"

Bennett's serious face appeared in the doorway. "You've both been breaking in here? How shitty is your security, Jolie?"

I glared at him over Zach's shoulder. "Better than the security at fucking Spencer Tower, Bennett."

"Nope," Zach said, releasing me from my spot on the wall and grabbing my hand. He pointed between Bennett and me. "You two, behave. We're all going to breakfast—no fighting."

We continued our stare off until Bennett finally huffed out a frustrated breath and stepped back into the hallway.

Noah offered his arm to Mari with his charming smile, and she giggled as she wrapped her hand around his elbow. "How gallant. Max would be very jealous if he knew."

Noah's grin widened. "Zach, take a picture of us."

I yanked Zach into the hallway before he could reach for his phone.



The intense interest of our fellow students in the Heirs' change of location from the asshole table to my table in the dining hall hadn't died down even a little bit since it'd first happened last week. The student body had gathered that Zach and I were no longer ex-best friend/mortal enemies, and the fact that Noah and Bennett had come over to my side with him wasn't a giant shock, but speculation was rampant as to what exactly was going on.

It was interesting how random people weren't shouting the word "slut" at me in the hallways anymore, even though Zach usually made it a point to shove his tongue down my throat whenever he said goodbye to me in between classes.

I'd already tucked into my omelet and was happily sipping my coffee, Zach's arm slung over the back of my chair as he talked across me to Bennett, who loomed like a king at the head of the table, when Noah finally made it over to us with his plate.

"Hey, hands off, you mooch," I griped at Noah, turning to glare at him over my shoulder as he stole a particularly ripe strawberry off my plate, popping it into his mouth as he stood behind my chair.

"Thanks, Jojo," he said with an innocent grin, leaning down to press a lingering kiss to my neck before whispering in my ear, "It was almost as sweet as your pussy."

My cheeks heated as Zach groaned next to me. "Fuck, man, don't remind me. It's already been way too long since I had my tongue inside the Princess, and I am *jonesing*."

I was about to have to threaten both of them with the tiny knife in my boot if they didn't stop trying to melt my panties in public—I had a fucking image to keep up—when Annie stormed up to Noah where he still stood behind me.

"Noah, did I seriously just see you put your mouth on that trashy *bitch*?" she screeched loud enough for all tables in our immediate vicinity to hear. "First Zach, now you? What would your father think?"

The chatter around us quieted considerably.

Noah's warm hand landed on the back of my neck, giving me a comforting squeeze. "I'm no longer affiliated with my father, Annie. I'll be doing my part to take Hargraves in a… different direction."

"Noah! What in the world—"

“You know, Annie, I’m glad you’re here,” he went on, and I could hear the silky smile in his voice. His hand remained on my neck, and he rubbed little circles on my skin with his thumb as he spoke, his voice projecting across the dining hall. “I think we need to have a little talk. First and foremost, I’d appreciate it if you’d refrain from insulting my girlfriend. I don’t like it, and I don’t think the staff would enjoy having to clean your blood off the floor if she pulls a knife on you again.”

Gasps and murmurs rang out. I wasn’t sure if our fellow students were more shocked that Noah referred to me as his girlfriend or that he insinuated that I had in fact pulled a knife on Annie prior to today, but I had a feeling that was going to be the least of Annie’s problems.

“She is *not* your girlfriend,” Annie bit out, petulant as shit. I craned my head around to get a good look at her rapidly reddening face, and Noah’s grip on my neck tightened possessively. Annie went on, “We all know she’s sold her slutty cunt to Ferrero.”

Noah’s smile vanished. “What did I *just* say?”

“*Noah*—”

“It’s very interesting, Annie, that you’re throwing around slut-shaming insults when you’ve been sucking cock for top grades since the beginning of the school year.”

Bigger gasps, and then complete and utter silence.

No one wanted to miss the details on *that*.

Annie’s face had gone from flushed with rage to pale in one second flat. Her jaw dropped open before she snapped it closed and put on her haughtiest sneer. “That is outrageous, Noah. Are you sure you’re not confusing me with your skank *girlfriend* who clearly sucks cock to get back into the good graces of the Families she’s insulting with her very presence?”

Noah tutted like he was disappointed in her before he pulled his phone from his suit pocket. He lazily typed something on the screen before slipping it back into his jacket.

Every phone in the dining hall buzzed with an incoming urgent email to our Holywell Academy inboxes.

“Avert your eyes, Princess,” Zach said with a snicker. “I don’t want you seeing Professor Montague’s dick.”

My head snapped to him. “Are you fucking serious?”

I leaned over to look at Zach’s phone screen, and sure enough, there was a video of Annie on her knees in Montague’s office, her head bobbing as she went to town between his legs as he sat behind his desk. Montague was a higher math prof who was rail-thin, somewhere in his mid-to-late thirties, with glasses and surprisingly good hair. He was also apparently a perv who traded sexual favors for grades.

“Unbelievable,” Mari said in a loud voice as she looked at her own phone. “So nasty, Annie! And here we all thought you were a smart girl.”

Annie could only stare at Noah, outraged and speechless, like she still couldn’t believe he wasn’t secretly in love with her after all.

“I already sent the good professor on his way this morning,” Noah announced. “And I suggest you run along and pack your dorm, too, Annie. Your expulsion is imminent, and your father is not going to be very happy with you, is he?”

“Noah, how could you do this to *me*?” she screeched.

Noah’s answering smile was cold and deadly. “Oh, I don’t know, Annie. How could you chain a girl to a radiator and send someone in to rape her? How could you conspire to have the same girl drowned and frozen to death in the middle of the river? How could you continue to think you and I are meant to be together when I find you abhorrent? Life’s full of mysteries.”

She screamed before she turned and fled the hall. The mutters and laughs of our classmates followed her out the door.

Noah finally slid into the seat next to me. He folded his napkin across his lap before taking a big swig of his coffee and glancing around the table. “So, I thought the Finance homework due today was particularly difficult. What about you guys?”

We all just stared at him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ZACH



I sat next to Bennett on my mom's velvet sofa—one of many gaudy pieces of furniture in her office at the Club. We were silent as we listened to Mom coo into the phone at whoever she was milking for money or influence while we waited for Bennett's dad to join us. Mom's bodyguard, Ramon, loomed in the corner like the hulking, silent gargoyle he was, and I made sure to flip him off when Mom wasn't looking.

As expected, we'd been required to appear before our parents yet again to answer for something Jojo had done. The press release announcing that Knight Acquisitions had purchased and placed under new leadership the entirety of the Hargraves Tech empire had launched midday, and neither my mom nor James Spencer appreciated how little their buddy Peter Hargraves had clued them into this latest little snafu for the Families.

Mom hung up the phone and gave us both her saccharin smile. "Boys, I do appreciate you popping over here during your school day. James and I thought it was important for us to have a little… tête-à-tête*,* just Ferrero and Spencer, as it were."

"No problem, Andrea," Bennett replied in his usual monotone.

"Sure, Mom," I chimed in with a smile as fake as hers. "Anything for Ferrero."

She eyed me, all teeth and red lipstick. “You’re such a good boy, Zachary.”

Finally, James Spencer waltzed in, doing little to hide his distaste for the ostentatious office that Mom had decorated like a Marie Antoinette fever dream, and he snagged the high-backed leather chair in front of Mom’s desk.

“Peter is such a fucking chump,” he barked irritably as he sat. “This is what happens when the head of a Family just decides to take a permanent vacation.”

“Indeed,” Andrea replied, leaning back in her chair to casually examine her long red fingernails. “Occasionally one must put some effort into retaining our interests. I just had to have a conversation with one of my largest casino investors who seemed to think the little Knight rat had something to offer that Ferrero didn’t. Fortunately, I am here to step in where Peter has neglected to, and the Lings were happy to inform my investor that the leukemia treatment his young daughter is currently receiving at their finest hospital would no longer be available should they decide to… jump ship.”

Bennett and I both said nothing. We were used to the unsavory shit the Families got up to in the pursuit of power, but denying cancer treatment to a child was a new one for us.

Luckily, I’d decided long ago I didn’t want any part of this shit. Bennett needed to do the same before time ran out.

“Hargraves is bleeding,” James added. “Peter will undoubtedly move to fill in those gaps with Hargraves’s… other business.”

He meant their expansive trade of illegal drugs—always handy for some extra cash.

“What do you need from us?” Bennett asked. He was irritable today, but the cracks in his facade were probably only noticeable to me.

James looked at his son, his expression daring Bennett to lie to him. “Has Noah broken away from his father?”

Time to tread carefully. Bennett was not happy that Noah hadn’t put up at least the *appearance* of resistance to Jolie’s move against Hargraves, but we would work with what we had.

“He has,” Bennett replied. “I think you both know that Noah has been running Hargraves in Peter’s absence for a while now. Jolie

is… smitten with Noah, and she's allowed him to remain a part of Hargraves Tech on its board. I believe Noah intends to use this as a jumping off point to take over Hargraves for good."

"And he remains loyal to the Families?" Andrea asked.

Bennett turned his expressionless face to her. "Of course."

She drummed her nails on the surface of her desk. "I suppose an insider is a good thing for us." She looked at me. "But I thought the little bitch was smitten with *you*, Zachary. Has she replaced you?"

I smirked. "No, Mom."

"And you're keeping an eye on her?"

Like I ever wanted to do anything else with my time. "Always."

James scoffed. "At least some of you are doing something useful with your cocks." He glared at Bennett. "I don't appreciate you disobeying my direct orders."

"I've been busy, Father."

"Well, clear your calendar, *son*," he spat, "because Elise has planned your engagement party at the *request* of your fiancée."

Fuck.

Bennett ground his jaw, shooting his dad the world's iciest stare. "And when will that be?"

"Saturday."

Great.

"At the Academy."

Super.

I glanced at Bennett, a look passing between us. Now it made sense.

Harper wanted to rub her engagement in the face of all of her fellow students, including—and probably mostly—Jolie.

"Have Elise send me the details, please," Bennett said, like he was scheduling a haircut.

"Oh, how lovely," Andrea gushed. "A Family wedding really is the event of the decade. Zachary, once you're finished playing with the Knight trash, we should find you a nice well-bred girl to give me some grandchildren."

Probably so she could consume them for eternal youth.

"Sounds great, Mom."

James stood up, and we took that as our cue to do the same. “I expect all three of you to have better intel on the Knight girl’s activities and her resources now that two of you are fucking her, apparently. I do not want any more surprises, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Bennett replied as I gave him a little salute.

He waved us off, and we strode from the room before either of them could come up with something else they wanted to bitch at us about.



The next afternoon, I sweet-talked the Princess into helping me with my Economics homework.

In my bedroom.

While Noah was tutoring a student and Bennett was still at crew practice.

She’d come into our penthouse dorm apartment fresh from her shower after her own crew practice, looking like an adorable snack dressed in tight black yoga pants and a soft, off-the-shoulder sweatshirt. I’d watched as she took in our living space for the first time—the vaulted ceiling, the dark-gray walls, and the huge black leather sofa situated directly in front of the hundred-inch flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. She’d snarked at me about our spacious modern kitchen that no one cooked in, but I’d just plastered my mouth to hers before leading her to my bedroom.

We were now sprawled out on my bed, Jojo propped up on her stomach as she scribbled in her workbook, and I was lazily scrolling through my tablet as I leaned against my headboard, taking the opportunity to pass my hand over the delicious curve of her ass at regular intervals as we worked.

“You going to behave yourself on Saturday, Princess?” I asked. I’d updated both Noah and her on our meeting with James and my mom after we’d all collapsed into Jojo’s bed late last night.

“Sure,” she replied, not convincing in the slightest. “It’s an honor to even receive an invitation to the Spencer Heir’s engagement party, is it not? Plus, with the untimely departure of both Lisa and

Annie, Harper's down a few friends. It's understandable she wants to make a show of her *status* by wearing white with her fiancé on her arm."

She almost said it without sounding ragey. I loved it.

"Baby girl, you know Bennett hates that bitch."

She hummed, flipping a page in her workbook. "Not enough, apparently."

Time to change the subject before Bennett ended up more in the doghouse than he already was. "You know what might be more fun to talk about? How you're planning to stick it to my mom."

She rolled onto her back to look up at me, her head down by my feet and her perfect toes now in my lap. I grabbed her foot and began to knead firm circles into the bottom of it, and my dick twitched as her eyes rolled briefly into the back of her head. "Are you pumping me for information, Ferrero?"

"Princess," I purred, running a hand up her strong calf. "I told you I wanted to be your partner. There is nothing in this world I wouldn't give you if you asked. Let me help you take your Family's legacy back, and let me keep you safe while we do it."

She smiled at me, and it lit up every piece of my dark soul. "You really mean it?"

I really did. "Of course, baby girl."

"Hmm, I dunno," she said, her face turning serious. "I keep things close to the vest for a reason, Zach. I do trust you and Noah, but I also don't want to endanger you any more than I already have by just… being with you."

I tossed my tablet to the side and crawled on top of her—slowly, so she could see me coming and have time to think about her choices. She stayed put, staring up at me with those gorgeous wide eyes as I straddled her thighs. I kept my eyes on hers as I snaked my fingers under the waistband of her leggings and slowly peeled them down her legs, leaving them bunched around her knees.

"Fuck me, Princess," I groaned. "No panties? Seriously?"

She shrugged. "Didn't bring any extras in my gym bag."

I combed my fingers through her little patch of trimmed blonde curls, taking a calming breath because I needed to *control myself* to accomplish what I wanted. "How can I help you fuck with my mom?"

I asked lightly. I dipped a finger through her folds that were currently locked between those long, toned thighs by her pants around her knees, just grazing her clit. Her breaths began to get heavier as I went on. “Tell me what I can do to get back what she took from you.”

I rubbed slow circles on her clit with the tip of my finger. She bit her luscious lip as she watched my hand work gently between her legs. “It’s already in the works, Zach. I’ve got it handled.”

“Wrong answer, Princess,” I said, pulling my hand away. I ran my tongue over the finger I’d touched her with before sucking it into my mouth. Her eyes glazed over with lust as she watched me, and I knew I had her. “Mmm,” I said. “Just a hint of that sweetness. I want more.”

She squirmed against the restraint of her pants. “Give me more, then, Zach.”

“I would love to, baby girl. But you need to give *me* more first, don’t you?” I dipped two fingers back between her legs, and I smothered the obscene groan that worked its way into my throat at the wetness I found there. “Are you coming for Ferrero Innovations?”

That was the chunk of my Family’s business that used to be Knight. It also took up the remainder of Knight Tower, since Spencer had moved their Knight operations elsewhere.

“Maybe,” she said, followed by a little whine as I removed my hand from her again. “Okay, yes.”

“Good,” I murmured, sliding two fingers into her soaking pussy. I hooked them forward and found the little rough patch I knew was the magic button, and I watched with deep, primal satisfaction as her eyes rolled back in her head and a moan escaped her lips. “I want you to have F.I. back. I want you to have your Family Tower back. I want you to have everything you want, Princess.”

I pumped my fingers inside her, rubbing her clit with my thumb and relishing the extra tightness caused by her thighs being locked together by her pants. She gritted her teeth and shut her eyes like she was bracing against the onslaught of pleasure I was about to give her. “Zach. I’m close. Don’t stop.”

I stopped.

“What the fuck, Ferrero!”

“Tell me your plan, baby girl. Involve me. Let me be your partner.”

And finally—*finally*—she clued me into what she had in store for my mom. I was already so turned on, I was about to bust in my sweatpants, and her ingenious, sneaky shit was now about to push me over the edge.

I started working her again, fast and hard, my fingers driving into her until her muscles contracted around me and she let out a hoarse cry.

I dove down to swallow that cry, slamming my lips onto hers as she screamed.

"*Zach*," she keened against my mouth.

I sucked on her tongue one last time before I sat up again, my hand moving slowly now between her legs as she came down. "That was beautiful, baby girl." I pulled my fingers from her pussy and stuck them in my mouth, savoring her taste as she watched, pupils blown wide and cheeks flushed a delightful pink. "Mmm. My favorite flavor."

She sat up, shimmying her pants back up her legs. She scooted closer to me, and my heart thumped wildly as she pawed at my sweatpants, gunning for my painfully hard dick.

"You want my cock, Princess?"

She arched a blonde brow. "You want to walk around with that raging monster the rest of the night?"

"Not likely—"

The door to my bedroom burst open.

Jolie whirled, a knife appearing in her hand—*where the fuck was she keeping all these knives?*—while I paused my reflexive reach for the gun in my nightstand drawer when I saw who stood in the doorway, wearing an amused grin.

"Oh, so sorry, nephew," Frankie said, sounding not sorry at all. "Am I interrupting something important?" He winked at Jojo.

"Yes, you dick," I griped. "What do you want? Whatever it is, breaking into our dorm is unnecessary." I pulled Jojo into my lap, her body helping to hide my massive hard-on, and I leaned us against the pillows piled up by my headboard.

Frankie grinned, rubbing his chipped black fingernails along his frayed white tank top—this one had "NOFX" scrawled across the

front in big red letters. Frankie didn't believe in sleeves—or jackets in winter, or boundaries.

"My dear sister has decided to increase the Ferrero Enforcer presence around the Academy," he said. "I'm supposed to be bugging not only your dorm but your lady's as well. I think Andrea just wants to make sure her beloved son is doing his *duty*."

I snorted. "Fine. Plant a bug in the living room, and Noah can discover it later tonight during a conveniently timed regular sweep of the dorm."

He nodded before turning his sly grin on Jojo. "How about it, Little Knight? Want to escort me to your quarters?"

She twirled her knife through her fingers. "How about I stick this in your thigh again and you tell Andrea you tried?"

Well, that wasn't helping get rid of my erection.

Frankie let out a boisterous laugh. "I'm so glad you're back, Little Knight. Still as perfect for my nephew as always."

He turned and ambled back down the hall, and we finished our homework while listening to his happy whistling as he moved around our living room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JOLIE



"Why did I agree to attend this bullshit, again?"

Noah chuckled next to me, squeezing my hand. "Because you're not letting Harper think you're bothered by her."

"And you're reminding our fearless leader how much sexier you are than his fiancée," Zach added from where he was pressed in close behind me.

"Bennett can do what he wants," I said with a scoff.

Zach let out a wry laugh. "Not sure Bennett even knows what that is, Princess. But he doesn't stand a chance tonight—black is your color, baby girl."

"*All* colors are her colors," Noah said diplomatically, bringing my hand to his lips to press a kiss to my wrist.

I sighed. My boyfriends had made me feel like the world's most desirable woman when they'd arrived at my dorm and gotten a glimpse of me with a full face of makeup and wearing my slinky black evening gown. My dress was simple and understated, dipping low between my small breasts and sporting a high slit that allowed a generous view of my leg. I'd been very proud of myself for putting it all together without Mari's help, as she was currently skipping a week of school to visit Carmen in Madrid after I'd given her a plane ticket for Valentine's Day a few weeks ago.

Zach had taken one look at me and said something like, “Fuck this party,” and it had taken Noah as the voice of reason to pry him off me—but not before Noah had run those long fingers up my thigh and ghosted them over the strap of my sheer thong with a sexy wink.

But now as I stood here, taking in the atrium of A Dorm—the location of Bennett’s engagement party because it was one of the few spaces on campus fancy enough with room for a large crowd—I felt less certain about my ability to be impervious to this nonsense.

The high ceilings had been draped with twinkling white lights, and the modern furniture that was usually spread throughout the atrium had been replaced with dozens of round tables, each draped with white tablecloths and surrounded by golden chairs. Towering floral arrangements made up each table’s centerpiece, the whites, greens, and golds of their flowers cascading down to the tabletop like a waterfall. Bow-tied waiters floated around with trays of food, and the soft music of an honest-to-God harp player filled the cavernous room.

The entirety of the student body was in attendance, dressed in their formal best, and I noted that some of the Tier One students’ parents had also merited an invitation. The men wore tuxedos, and the women flitted around in evening gowns, all of them in various hues of gold, as instructed by the invitation.

I never was great at following instructions.

We were, fortunately, a fashionable hour late to this farce, and Noah confirmed that James Spencer and his wife had already come and gone.

As we processed further into the room, I felt an encouraging twinge of satisfaction as all eyes fell on us—me in my somber black dress, clutching the arms of my two sexy, famous boyfriends. Noah’s navy tux brought out his deep blue eyes, and he’d swapped his brown frames for some edgy dark-gray ones. Zach’s tux was all black, and he’d swept his dark hair out of his eyes, giving the entire room a view of the sharp lines of his masculine face. His lip ring glinted under the bright lights, and I could imagine the panties disintegrating around us as he cast that cocky smirk around the room.

Harper had wanted to shove this in my face by holding the party not only at the Academy but in our fucking residence hall, but at least for a few minutes, our entrance had sucked all the attention away from her.

We orbited the crowded room for a while, the guys nodding in the barest acknowledgment to the occasional person like the untouchable princes they were. I drank one glass of champagne, and it wasn't enough to make this less painful.

Then it was time to pay our respects.

"Deep breaths, baby girl," Zach whispered as we approached the center of the room where Harper and Bennett held court.

Harper had decided to go "ethereal fairy" with her attire tonight, her thin body draped in a gauzy white gown that sparkled under the lights. Her dark-blonde hair fell in soft waves around her face, and her makeup artist had done his, her, or their damnedest to soften her harsh, haughty features into something soft and pretty—an innocent, virginal bride for the future King of the City.

Noah joined the pep talk. "You're a queen. She's a vapid, petty little girl."

"I'm fine, guys," I said with a huff. "I truly don't give a fuck about Harper."

But, of course, the monstress that lurked inside me gave a *lot* of fucks about Bennett. He was mine—*ours*, a part of our quad, just as he had been since the day my first nanny had set my tiny infant body into the boys' playpen at the Hargraves penthouse—and seeing that bitch attached to him, encroaching on *us* like a disease, was not getting any easier.

Bennett stood next to Harper, still towering over her even though she wore sky-high heels, and he looked perfect as always in his dark-gray tuxedo. He'd gotten a fresh haircut, the sides expertly faded into a stylish longer top, and his keen moss-green eyes surveyed the room with that edge of boredom he always had.

Until his eyes landed on me.

I watched as he dragged his gaze from my face and down my body, his nostrils flaring and his jaw clenching, but then he wiped it all away. I glared right back at him, unable to hide my distaste for the

fact that he had his fucking arm around Harper's waist as they greeted the ass-kissers in line to congratulate them.

"Oh, hello, Zach. Hello, Noah. I'm *so* happy our future groomsmen could be here to celebrate with us," Harper cooed at my boyfriends as we stepped in front of them. She snuggled further into Bennett's side with an exaggerated sigh, then she slid her gaze to me, her arrogant smile never faltering. "Hopefully by the wedding, you'll both be finished with your slumming-it phase."

I returned that fake smile—I'd spent my childhood watching the adults around me do this shit constantly, so I, too, was a pro. "Careful, Jansen. Your fiancé won't appreciate you insulting his brothers' taste in women, even if *his* is abysmal."

Zach snickered, rubbing his hand lovingly along my exposed back, and I could feel Noah's smile as he placed a tender kiss to my temple before he said, "Yes, you should be careful, Harper. Jolie doesn't take well to slights on any of us, and I know for a fact that she's armed tonight."

Bennett's annoyance was about to break through his stone-cold facade, and Harper's winning smile finally slipped away, replaced with the haughty, self-important sneer we all knew was her real face.

"Well, my *fiancé* doesn't take well to threats to his betrothed," she spat, looking at me. "There is nothing in this City mightier than Spencer, and he chose *me* to continue the Family line. Knight is dead. Your parents are *dead*. Nobody gives a fuck about you, and Zach and Noah will soon realize, just as Bennett has *always* known, that you're just a trashy slut trying to fuck her way back into relevance in this City."

I felt Zach and Noah both tense next to me, and I gave both of them a reassuring squeeze before I took a big step forward, crowding the bride-to-be until we were mere inches apart. "Your *fiancé* can't protect you from me, you pathetic, desperate bitch," I said in a dangerous whisper. "I haven't forgotten that you tried to kill me last semester. I might even be dead, too, if your *fiancé* hadn't pulled me from the water, warmed me up, and then made me come so hard I saw the fucking galaxy."

"*Jolie*," Bennett barked, the warning clear in his voice.

Harper let out a scandalized gasp. “You lying bitch! Bennett would *never* touch you, especially not when you were pretending to be a nasty skank from the slums.”

I plowed on. “So, here’s my promise to you, Harper. Before you’re able to cash in on this marriage your parents bought for you, the Spencer Family empire will be *nothing*. It’ll be a mythical thing that’s whispered about by this City’s washed-up elite when they reminisce about ‘the good old days.’ You’ll be pawning that massive diamond on your finger so you can still afford your hair extensions. And you’ll be looking over your shoulder, jumping at every single shadow, wondering if today’s the day Jolie Knight comes to finish the job. Because you’ll have finally realized that I don’t let shit go.” I shoved her backward, and she stumbled on her heels like a wobbly baby deer until Bennett caught her arm and righted her. “No, I fucking *collect*, Harper. And neither your *fiancé* nor his piece-of-shit father can stop me.”

“Jolie,” Bennett snapped. “Back. Away.”

Harper trembled, her face flushed with rage, and she lunged at me, claws out, only to be jerked backward by Bennett’s hold on her bicep.

“Alright,” Noah said, ever the peacekeeper, as he stepped between us. “Let’s table this little discussion until we don’t have quite the audience, yes?”

“Get her out of here,” Bennett hissed at him. “I will not have this become any more of a fucking spectacle than it already is.”

While plenty of the partygoers were oblivious, laughing and drinking as they enjoyed being *seen*, a small crowd had drifted closer to us, all of them trying and failing not to look like they were hanging on our every word.

“Fine,” Zach drawled, taking my hand and rubbing little circles on my palm with his thumb. “But figure out how to muzzle your bitch, dude. The next time she insults *our* girl or utters even a single syllable about the Knights, it won’t be Jojo making her bleed.”

“Bennett!” Harper wailed.

He ignored her, yanking on her arm and turning to stalk toward the bar, dragging his tantrum-throwing fiancée along behind him.

I watched them go. Any fury I'd felt in the heat of the moment washed completely away, and I was left with a hollow feeling in my chest that I didn't want to examine further.

I just wanted it gone.

Noah's concerned face appeared in front of me. He cupped my cheeks with gentle hands. "You good, sweetheart?"

I nodded. "Let's get out of here."



"Just say the word, Princess, and I'll have Frankie pay Harper a visit. Just to scare her a little, nothing too bloody. He's good at finding ways to *chat* with people that don't leave a scar. Not a physical one, anyway."

The three of us had collapsed onto the massive couch in the Heirs' dorm apartment. Zach hadn't been two feet over the threshold before he'd divested himself of his jacket and tie, and Noah had lost his own jacket a few minutes later, right before he pulled me into his arms and settled us into the crook of the big sectional sofa. I was now reclined against his chest, his long legs splayed on either side of me, and I had one leg in Zach's lap, enjoying the rough feel of his hand as he ran it up and down my calf.

"I appreciate the offer," I said to Zach. "But I'll deal with Harper on my own time. She's just not that important, as much as she wishes she was."

"Isn't that the truth," Noah murmured, his lips against my ear. "Bennett needs to figure out how to extricate himself from this idiotic situation."

"If he even wants to," I muttered.

I watched Zach exchange a look with Noah over my shoulder, and I knew a change of subject was imminent.

Noah began to run his fingertips lightly over my collarbone. "What would you say, sweetheart, to Zach helping you take your mind off all that bullshit?"

Zach shifted at my feet, getting to his knees on the couch and spreading my legs out on either side of him. "Please, baby girl?" He

ran his hands up my thighs, tossing the silky fabric of my dress out of the way so that my tiny thong was exposed. “All I’ve been able to think about since I first laid eyes on you tonight was fucking you with my tongue.”

I sucked in a breath, and Noah’s warm, throaty chuckle seeped into my body right next to Zach’s dirty words. “I would love to watch him do that, sweetheart. I’ll be very jealous that he gets to taste that sweet pussy, but the thought of holding you while you come is also very appealing to me.”

“Fuck,” I bit out as Zach peeled my panties down my legs and worked them over my black pumps that were still anchored to my feet by their thin ankle straps. “Yes, please, Zach.”

Zach just hiked the skirt of my dress up higher before passing a few fingers through my folds. “She’s so fucking wet already, dude. Just the idea of my tongue in her pussy has her soaked.”

Noah growled in my ear. I could feel his hard dick pressing into my lower back, and I ached to touch it. “Make her come, Ferrero. She said please.”

Zach made himself comfortable, tossing my legs over his shoulders, and he paused to wink up at me. “He’s so bossy, isn’t he, Princess?”

“I fucking love it,” I said, gasping as Noah’s teeth found the shell of my ear.

Zach groaned. “Fuck, man. I’m going to come in my pants just looking at her like this.”

I squirmed, nearly reduced to begging him to touch me, when the front door swung open.

Bennett stalked inside, slamming the door behind him. He took three purposeful strides into the living room before he came to an abrupt halt, his eyes landing on the three of us in our… compromising position. He stood frozen next to the dining table across the room from us, his green eyes wide with shock.

“Oh, look who’s decided to join us,” Noah said lightly, his tongue finding my ear again.

Zach snickered, craning his head to give Bennett a smug stare from between my thighs. “Better keep it moving, Spencer, or else you’re going to get a show.”

Bennett’s hot gaze landed on mine, boring into me with so much lust-tinged anger that my head spun.

I should’ve shoved Zach away and covered myself until Bennett left the room. I should’ve stood up, dusted myself off, and marched right up to him and punched him in the face for kicking me out of his party. I should’ve done literally anything other than what I did, which was remain exactly where I was while I let him move that heated stare down my body and land right on my exposed wet pussy.

His eyes lingered there for a few long seconds before he finally tore them away and met mine again, and I gave him a challenging stare.

He returned it, remaining rooted to the spot.

Noah grinned up against my neck once more. “I see. Well, what are you waiting for, Ferrero? Get to work.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

JOLIE



Zach didn't have to be told twice. He dove back between my legs and buried his face in my pussy, shoving his tongue inside me with a guttural moan.

"Look how happy he is down there, sweetheart," Noah said as Zach ran his tongue through my center with great enthusiasm. "He loves going down on you. I do, too, but I'll have to be content kissing these sweet lips instead. And maybe copping a little feel of these amazing tits."

He jerked my head toward him with the force of a man who knew what he wanted, and he swallowed my moan in a deep kiss as Zach finally sucked my clit into his mouth. Noah dipped his other hand into the front of my dress, and his nimble fingers found my tight nipple.

"Oh shit," I moaned as Zach slipped a finger inside me, continuing his assault on my clit with his tongue.

"We're going to show Bennett how gorgeous you are when you come," Noah announced. "Oh, wait. He already knows that, doesn't he? That lucky bastard."

My eyes slammed into Bennett's where he remained, rigid and unmoving, next to the dining room table on the other side of the living room. He'd clenched his fists so tight they were trembling at his sides, and he soaked up everything his brothers were doing to me like he needed it to breathe.

“I said this to Princess the first time I was fortunate enough to have my face between her legs,” Zach said in between laves of my sensitive flesh. “But Bennett should’ve taken some more time with this perfect pussy back when he had the chance.” He tossed a cocky grin in Bennett’s direction. “You’d have realized then she was actually a natural blonde.”

Bennett’s nostrils flared, but he still didn’t speak. He watched with his usual intense focus as Zach wrapped his lips around my clit once more and sucked hard as he drove two thick fingers into me, fucking me with them until I felt my muscles tighten around him.

“Oh fuck, Zach,” I whined. “Oh my God.”

“Mmm, there it is,” Noah purred, his long fingers wrapped around my throat as he continued to tweak my nipple with his other hand. “Come for us, sweetheart. For all three of us. Let’s hear it.”

One more pass of Zach’s tongue and I fell over the edge. I screamed, the waves of pleasure shooting through my body. My back arched, my hands fisted in Noah’s pants, and my eyes once again landed on Bennett.

He was now bent over, bracing himself with his palms flat on the table like he was in pain as he watched my orgasm take me—a deep, desperate hunger in those mossy eyes.

It just made me come harder.

“Oh shit,” I moaned when I finally regained the power of speech. “Fuck.”

Zach placed one last kiss to my pussy before he popped up, kneeling between my legs again as he held his glistening fingers up to examine them in the light.

Bennett sucked in a harsh breath as Zach offered those fingers to Noah. My mouth fell open as I turned my head to watch Noah wrap his lips around Zach’s fingers with a pleased little moan, tasting *me*.

And he was staring right over my shoulder at Bennett as he did it.

Is it possible to be so turned on it actually kills you?

“You’re delicious, sweetheart,” Noah said after he’d had a nice long taste.

That finally did it. Bennett shoved away from the table and stalked angrily away, disappearing down the hall before we heard the loud slam of his bedroom door.

I sagged in Noah's arms. "Did we push him too far?"

"No. He needed it," Noah replied.

Zach was also unbothered. "Don't worry, Princess." I perked up again as he started unzipping his pants. "He just went to jack off in the shower. No one wants to blow a load in their pants in front of their lady."

"Mmm, whatever you say," I said, still feeling dazed.

Zach shoved his pants just far enough below his ass to pull his thick dick out. "Can I, baby girl? I'm so fucking turned on, it's painful."

I nodded. "Hold on."

With great effort, I rolled in Noah's arms, landing on my hands and knees, now looking him right in the face. "Hi, Noah," I said with a dreamy smile.

He beamed at me, reaching up to sweep a tendril of my hair behind my ear. "Hi, Jojo."

"Can I suck you off while Zach fucks me?"

Zach groaned behind me. "Fucking shit, Princess."

Noah bit his lip, closing his eyes for a second like he was in pain before he opened them again, his pupils blown wide behind those sexy glasses. "Of course you can, sweet girl."

I fumbled with his zipper while I waved my ass at Zach, who got the hint, and he began to run his hard dick through my folds with a pleased growl.

When I had Noah's dick free from his pants, I gave him a few experimental tugs. "I'm not going to promise I can suck cock better than the girls at the Club," I said with a wry smile. "But I'm going to give it my best shot."

They both chuckled. "It'll be perfect, Jolie," Noah said, caressing my cheek. "Because it's *you*."

I nodded, feeling the sincerity of his words, and then I went for it. I ran my tongue from his base to his tip before sucking him into my mouth, and I moaned around him as Zach sank into me from behind. He wrapped his big hands around my hips and began to pound away, his thrusts relentless and brutal from the start.

"This mouth is perfect, sweetheart," Noah said, his voice strained. "Zach's fucking you so good, isn't he?"

I whimpered around him, feeling a second climax building at a mind-numbing pace. I opened my throat to take him deeper, allowing Zach's hard thrusts to move me up and down on Noah's dick. He tasted a little like soap, and a little like sweat, and I savored the power I felt at his every rasp and groan.

"Fuck," Noah bit out, burying his hands in my hair.

"This is the hottest fucking shit I've ever seen," Zach panted, upping his pace to punishing. "Fuck, I'm gonna come."

"Sweetheart, are you close?" Noah was hanging on by a thread.

I popped off him, taking a moment to brace myself against his hip as Zach's ruthless thrusts pushed me higher. "So close. Fuck. *Zach*."

"I got you, Princess." He maneuvered a hand between my legs, and with a few rough circles on my clit, I was gone.

I managed to get Noah back into my mouth as I came, screaming around his dick as he gripped my hair so tight it skirted the edge of pain.

"Fuck *yes*, baby girl. She's choking the life out of my cock, man."

"Mine too. Sweetheart, decide where you want me."

Zach's muffled cry sounded behind me, his thrusts slowing as he reached his own climax, and suddenly the she-beast reared her head.

I moved lightning fast, like I was grappling in the cage. I released Noah as I slid my hips away from Zach, then I grabbed Noah by his tie and jerked him forward as I fell backward into a surprised Zach's lap.

Just as I slid the top of my dress down to expose my breasts, I looked at Noah. "On me," I demanded.

Noah's eyes widened as Zach wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pinning me in place. "Holy *fuck*, Princess."

Noah straddled me, and with a few quick tugs on his dick, he spilled himself on my chest. "Goddamn, sweetheart. I fucking love this. Look at you."

I lay there, panting and sated, the sticky warmth of Noah's release decorating my tits as they both stared down at me with something like awe. "I, uh… honestly do not know where that came from. I just really wanted to *see* you come, Noah. And I guess I wanted to… show Zach what I did?"

Noah bent down to give me a blistering kiss. “No explanation necessary. I will come on you whenever and wherever you want, sweet girl. Zach’s always invited to watch.”

He clambered off of me, retreating to the bathroom as he zipped his pants while Zach cradled me in his arms. He pressed a few sweet kisses to my neck. “Never letting you go, baby girl.”

“Same, Zach. You guys are mine.”

Noah returned with a damp washcloth and cleaned me up like a gentleman. Deciding we’d tortured Bennett enough, we righted our clothes and decamped to my room. I fell asleep pressed tight between them, my Noah and my Zach, and Bennett’s hot, desperate stare was the last thing I saw before I slipped off into the darkness.



I woke up on Monday morning, feeling like it was a great day to ruin Andrea’s life.

A lot had happened over the weekend during which my team had worked hard to make sure not even a ripple reached the eyes or ears of Andrea’s inner circle. Now, it was my turn to bring us over the finish line.

And I was going to have to sit down and look my mother’s murderer right in her evil fucking face to do it.

I met Dom and Max at the Academy gates after my morning classes, and they escorted me to the train. We rode the short distance to the Serpentis Casino in the heart of the City, and with the room key Max had procured somehow—using his wiles, no doubt—we entered without fanfare through a locked entrance restricted to hotel guests.

We scanned the same key in the guest elevator and headed for the five-star restaurant on the casino roof. I gave a little finger wave to the camera in the elevator, knowing that by the time security clocked that it was *me* standing in this elevator, flanked by two large men dressed in black and strapped with guns, it would be too late to stop me from reaching my destination.

The doors opened with a soft ding, and I strode into the restaurant, passing the hostess's stand without even a glance.

"Excuse me! Miss! Do you have a reservation?"

I ignored her, my heels clicking across the sandy-colored marble of the restaurant floor as we marched through the dining room. Max veered off and disappeared down a hallway, and I wrinkled my nose as I took in the restaurant's gaudy ruby-red walls and the gold embellishments—*what was it with these people and the color gold?*

"You got this, honey," Dom said gently as we reached the patio doors. "Show her no emotion. In and out, then onto the next thing."

I nodded, steeling myself. Dom shoved the doors open with a little too much force, and I breezed through and out onto the sunny patio where Andrea happened to be enjoying lunch on this unseasonably warm March day with her son, the sinfully gorgeous Ferrero Heir.

Zach looked up at my approach, a mischievous smile spreading across his lips. His eyes heated as he took in my sheer blouse, pencil skirt, and dangerous red heels, then he sat back in his chair, arms crossed and ready to watch the show unfold.

Andrea's back was to us, but her bodyguard was quick to step into my path, impeding our way to her table.

"This is a private luncheon," Ramon said, crossing his burly arms over his chest as he aimed his dead stare right over my shoulder at Dom. "You have ten seconds to turn around and leave this casino before I call the Enforcer team up here to deal with you."

"Ramon, what—" Andrea barked, turning around in her chair, but before she could finish, Max appeared from the shadows.

He had a gun to Ramon's head before the bodyguard could reach for his weapon or his phone.

"Hold it right there, motherfucker," Max said with his usual teasing lilt. "My sister just wants to have a quick discussion with your mistress. You'll let the Knight Heir pass, or else the staff will be mopping your brains off the floor when we're finished."

Ramon's face didn't betray one speck of emotion, but he did as he was ordered, remaining still as a statue as I stalked around him.

Andrea's porcelain face morphed into a cunning smile as I took a seat at the table. She'd had what Hannah referred to as "the good

work” done by a talented doctor, so she hadn’t aged a day since the last time I saw her—a sleepover at Zach’s house a few weeks before I “died.” I remembered how she’d flitted in late, wearing the fifties-style swing dresses she favored back then, patted Zach’s cheek and told him he was a good boy, then disappeared into her office for the rest of the night.

The uncontrollable rage and pain I expected to feel when sitting across from the woman who murdered my mother remained at a contained simmer under my skin. Instead, I felt numb, my brain and my body shifting into the familiar mode of hyperfocus on the mission. No other emotions need apply.

“Oh, goodness,” Andrea said with faux excitement. “To what do we owe the pleasure? Did my son decide it was time to bring his little plaything to meet his mother?”

Zach squeezed my thigh under the cover of the white tablecloth, but he remained silent, his unbothered, lazy smirk affixed to his face.

I smiled right back at her. “You may not remember this, Andrea, but we’ve actually met before. I understand if your memory is slipping a bit, though. It happens at your age.”

Her smile evaporated—being called “old” was not something Andrea would abide by. “What do you want, you conniving little slut? If you’re here about that bullshit tender offer from that company you’re using to pretend you’re something in this City, you can save your breath. I’ve already rejected it. Ferrero can’t be *bought*, silly girl.”

I tutted, making a show of digging a file from my large designer bag. “I think you of all people should know, Andrea, that *anyone* can be bought. Especially disgruntled shareholders who find out they’re being lied to.”

If she’d had any color in her face at all, it would have drained away.

“Oh, Princess,” Zach rumbled, feigning surprise. “What have you done now?”

I tossed the file folder on the table. Andrea didn’t reach for it; instead, she remained eerily still, her unsettlingly familiar brown eyes boring into me like she was trying to crack my skull open so she could watch the life spill out of me.

Back at you, bitch.

“Since you don’t appear interested in reviewing the documents I’ve provided, I’ll just give you the executive summary,” I said. “My team thought it odd, to say the least, that while the majority of Family businesses saw their stock take a bit of a dip once it was revealed that you’re all a bunch of murdering psychopaths, most of the Ferrero empire was holding strong. So, we went digging. Your team did an excellent job cooking the books and hiding what was really going on, but unfortunately, my team is better. We provided evidence of the real story to all of the shareholders of Ferrero Innovations—which, in case your memory is slipping again, I’ll remind you is what you *stole* from my Family—and then we made them all a very generous offer for their shares. Well above what would be the *true* fair market value, which, let’s be honest, is actually shit.”

Andrea’s stone facade cracked, and she hurled the crystal champagne glass she’d been drinking from at the solid wall of the casino, and it shattered on impact.

I ignored it. “So, as of yesterday, Knight Acquisitions is now the majority owner of Ferrero Innovations. We also held a vote, and you’ve been removed as sole board member and CEO of the company. All Ferrero lackeys are being escorted from Knight Tower as we speak, and your Enforcer team’s access to *my* tower has been revoked. Consider this your notice that if anyone affiliated with Ferrero comes within fifty feet of Knight Tower, my team has been authorized to eliminate them on sight.”

I stood up, smoothing my skirt and tossing my bag over my shoulder before I leaned down to kiss Zach’s cheek. “See you at home,” I whispered, loud enough for Andrea to hear.

He winked at me. “Later, baby girl.”

As I marched away, I heard Andrea hiss at Zach, “How the *hell* did you let this happen?”

“You got outplayed, Mom,” Zach replied, and I could practically *hear* his shrug. “You’ve always taught me that you have to be ruthless to stay on top in this City. It turns out Jolie Knight is as fucking ruthless as they come, and the only people to blame are the ones that killed her parents in front of her and failed to make sure they’d finished the job.”

“*Zachary*,” Andrea snapped.

As I collected Max and Dom, both of whom now held guns aimed at Ramon, I heard Zach’s chair scrape across the shiny cement floor. “Thanks for lunch, Mom,” he said, oozing sweetness. “I’ve got to head back to the Academy or I’ll miss my afternoon lab.”

“Zachary!”

He ignored her, and by the time we were through the patio doors, he’d caught up with us. He muscled his way in between a grumbling Max and me, wrapping a possessive arm around my waist. “That felt even better than I’d imagined, Princess.”

My stomach dropped as the numbness faded and trepidation came rushing in. While Zach hadn’t exactly declared war on his mother, his time pretending to be her good little foot soldier was over.

He knew the risks, but it worried me all the same. Eventually the Families would stop underestimating us, and then the real games would begin.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JOLIE



It only took twenty-four hours for me to have to face down another bitch I hated.

I'd finished that afternoon's workout early, so I was already showered and mostly dressed when a large group of my crew teammates trudged into the locker room. I was looking forward to grabbing dinner, finishing my homework, and then snuggling up with my boyfriends to get yet another night of blissful, dreamless sleep.

But it was not to be.

"Did you fuck him, you dirty whore?"

I knew that grating shriek well. I blew out a long-suffering sigh before I turned away from my locker to face a sweaty, red-faced Harper, her minions scurrying away from her like they were ducking out of the blast zone.

I arched a casual brow. "Did I fuck who, Jansen? I have two boyfriends, so you'll need to be more specific."

She barked out a humorless laugh. "Exactly. You'll spread your legs for fucking anyone, especially an Heir. My fiancé disappeared from our party after he threw your skanky ass out, and he never came to stay in my room like we'd *planned*. So, I can only assume you lured him into some disgusting *orgy*."

Well, she wasn't *totally* wrong there. "Don't blame me for the fact that your fiancé would rather fuck his hand in the shower than stick it

in your vile hole, Harper."

She screeched in rage, and this time there was no Bennett to hold her back. She flew at me, her long nails extended and ready to claw my eyes out in a good old-fashioned bitch fight.

Too bad I didn't do those.

I ducked her easily, but she managed to get one pink-tipped talon hooked into the long chain of my necklace, and it snapped like a twig as she swiped at me, her momentum sending her sailing past me and into the lockers.

My stomach lurched as my cherry blossom charm flew from the chain and hit the unforgiving metal of the lockers. It cracked before dropping onto the bench below with a sad little clink.

Well, now I was *really* fucking pissed.

Harper bounced off the lockers with a firm shove—untrained as a fighter but athletic enough—and she charged at me again.

No one attempted to intervene—not even those spineless cunts who'd teamed up with her to throw me into the river last semester—because everyone else in this locker room had seen me go toe to toe with Zach Ferrero and knew better.

Harper's obsession with Bennett had made her lose all sense, so I was going to have to knock it back into her.

"Stay away from him, slut!" She wound up for an open-handed slap.

I caught her wrist, deliberated controlling myself and immediately dismissed the idea before I twisted it with a brutal snap.

Gasps rang out around the room.

She screamed, any dreams of glory she had for this crew season snuffed out in an instant. "You broke my fucking wrist!"

"You tried to kill me," I replied, reveling in the crunch of her shattered bones in my hand as I squeezed. "And you just broke the only thing I had left from my parents. You're getting off light, all things considered."

She began sobbing, sucking in panicked breaths as the pain and reality undoubtedly hit her.

I shoved her away, and she fell into the waiting arms of her sycophants, who gaped at me with pure terror in their eyes.

I gave them all my back, slinging my backpack over my shoulder and grabbing my gym bag. I carefully picked up the shards of my charm, gripping them tightly in my hand as I stomped angrily out of the locker room, down the gym hallway, and out onto the sprawling lawn of the Academy grounds.

I felt my lip wobble as I stalked across campus. *I will not cry for the first time in seven years over something Harper did. I will not fucking do it*.

Reaching the soft light of a sidewalk lamp, I paused to unfurl my clenched fist. I peeked down to study the two pieces of my rose-gold charm, hoping that maybe I could figure out a way to glue them back together. I'd get a shorter chain this time.

When the light hit the metal in my hand, I sucked in a breath.

What the hell?

I dropped my gym bag, then I fished in the pocket of my joggers for my phone.

Me: Where are you

Noah: My office. You ok?

Me: Need you to look at something. Meet you there in ten.

I gathered my shit, then I hurried toward Holywell Hall.

What were you up to, Dad?



Noah stared at the two pieces of my charm that I'd set carefully on his desk.

"That's a microKnight," he said, lifting one half of the cherry blossom between his long fingers and bringing it closer to his face. I could just make out the little rectangular edge of the disk under the harsh overhead lights of Noah's office. "These are old—they don't hold much data and went out of favor for Knight's bigger, flashier tech a long time ago."

"What the hell is it doing in my necklace?"

He looked at me, blue eyes serious behind his dark frames. "Hiding, sweetheart."

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. Noah turned his laptop so that we both could see the screen, then he slid the little drive attached to one half of my charm into one of its ports. A single file popped up on the screen, labeled simply, “JMKbackup.”

“My initials,” I said, throat dry.

“Yes.” Noah clicked the file.

I watched, breathless, as a simple text box appeared, containing a long string of nonsense numbers and letters.

“Noah,” I said, my heart rate ratcheting up to thundering. “Where is my dad’s drive?”

He was pale as he pulled open his bottom desk drawer, and I could hear the creak of him sliding away the false bottom. A tiny beep signaled the scan of his fingerprint onto the little safe contained there—now also keyed to my finger—and within seconds Noah had my dad’s silver KnightKey500 plugged into an additional port on his laptop.

As expected, the dialogue box popped up, demanding the encryption key. With a few quick keystrokes, Noah had pasted the string of letters and numbers from my charm into the box, and with a happy little chirp, the box disappeared to reveal—

“That’s… a shit ton of files,” I said because I didn’t have anything else to say. I couldn’t believe this was happening. “What was my dad thinking, hiding the encryption key to whatever this is in an eleven-year-old’s jewelry? He’s lucky it didn’t get lost down the drain of Zach’s fucking swimming pool!”

“It’s the backup, Jojo,” Noah replied, distracted as he started rapidly clicking through files. “My guess is, he had the original on him at all times. It probably was… lost with him—oh, holy shit.”

“What?”

Noah’s jaw dropped progressively further open as he clicked.

“Noah!”

“Fuck, okay. Have you ever heard of miraculene?”

I gave him a blank stare. “I’m a business major.”

“Right. It’s basically a miracle substance—hence the name—that was discovered a decade ago by some physicists in Prague. It’s a nanomaterial, and it was supposed to be like, the next huge innovation in tech… but no one’s been able to figure out how to

mass produce it in all these years. But, shit, I think your dad might have?"

"And that's a big deal?"

"Fucking huge. Um, okay." He sat back in his chair, blowing out a big breath. "Do you mind if I loop in my tech team lead? She'll be able to make better sense of this than I can."

I nodded. If Noah trusted her, I would do the same. "Can we conference in my guy too?"

He quirked a perfect blond brow at me. "I finally get to meet your *guy*?"

"In a manner of speaking." I shoved my phone at him, a link to Zepp on the screen.

He set up the secure line on his phone and dialed.

A no-nonsense female voice answered the phone after a single ring. "Yes, sir?"

"Hey, Silver," Noah responded, narrowing his eyes dangerously at me as I took a moment to mouth, *"Yes, sir"* at him with a roll of my eyes. "I've got Jolie, and we're conferencing in her guy. This is urgent."

"Boss lady." Zepp's drawl floated from Noah's phone speaker. "What can I do you for?"

A scandalized gasp sounded. "Zepp! Holy *shit*, I'd wondered where you'd slithered off to."

Zepp chuckled. "Hey there, Tina. Still toiling away for The Man, I see."

"It's *Silver*," she spat.

"Sure, sure."

"Ugh, of course you joined a resistance movement. How *cliche*."

I cleared my throat. "Can we focus, please?"

"Yes, ma'am," Silver replied, snapping back into professional mode.

"Um, you don't have to call me ma'am, Silver."

"I sure do, ma'am," she replied. "You're my boss's boss."

I shot a questioning look at Noah, who grinned at me. "I moved my team to the former Hargraves Tech. They're on Knight payroll now, and you are, in fact, the boss."

“Oh, look at that, Tina,” Zepp said, snickering. “You’re also part of the *resistance movement*.”

“At least our new offices are *gorgeous* and not whatever hole you’re currently hiding in.”

Noah cut in. “I’m going to be sending you a link to access my laptop, and I need you both to ensure you’re alone before you remote in.”

“I’m in the bunker, so I’m solid,” Zepp said around a mouthful of something crunchy.

“I knew it, you little rat,” Silver muttered, then she shouted into the background, “Listen up! Clear out of here and don’t come back until you hear from me!” Faint shuffling and grumbling sounded in the background, and a door slammed. “Okay. Ready.”

With a few quick keystrokes, Noah sent the two of them the secure link to view his screen. “I’m giving control to Silver, but you can both see the screen now.”

We watched as Silver began to click through the myriad of files stored on my dad’s drive.

“Holy fuck,” Zepp said, more serious than I’d ever heard him. “You unlocked your dad’s drive?”

“Yes.”

Silver gasped again. “Oh my God. He cracked the code on miraculene, Zepp.”

“I can see that, Tina.”

“Can one of you explain what this means?” I asked, my hands starting to shake.

“Miraculene is the world’s only two-dimensional material,” Silver began, her excitement increasing as she continued to flip through the documents on Dad’s drive. “It’s made up of a single layer of atoms, and it’s not only nearly impenetrable but also extremely thin and light. It’s the best conductor of heat and electricity we’ve ever seen, and it’s five hundred times stronger than steel. It was supposed to be *the* thing in next-gen tech back when it was discovered, but no one could do much with it besides create tiny little sheets of it in the lab.”

“But it looks like Knight did it,” Zepp added. “There’s documentation of the entire process in here. And draft patent

applications. And, holy fuck, proposed contracts from the governments and militaries of like twenty countries."

I controlled my trembling limbs, keeping my eyes glued to Noah's face in an attempt to stay grounded. He tore his gaze from the computer and reached across the desk to squeeze my hand. I asked, "This is what James Spencer wanted so badly? Miraculene?"

"Jojo," Zepp said gently. "What's on here? It's world-changing. Your dad has the schematics for a miraculene desalination filter that could solve the global water crisis. There's a patent application for materials that would allow construction of buildings without electrical wiring because the miraculene walls conduct electricity on their own. Not to mention the energy-saving implications of the natural heat conducting and cooling of a material like that."

"The textiles, though, Zepp," Silver added. "That's what these military contracts are for. Miraculene uniforms that are not only lightweight, keep the wearer cool in the heat and warm in the cold, and are *bulletproof*, but the miraculene textiles can also be made into smart clothes that monitor a soldier's biomarkers like a smart watch."

"And… that's all in here?" I asked. "None of this was ever anywhere on the Knight servers?"

"Not that we were ever able to find," Zepp replied.

"Same here," Silver added.

I looked at Noah, who still held my hand across the desk. His excitement from earlier had faded away, and now he wore a grim, serious look. "Is this something the Families would have killed him for?" I asked, barely above a whisper.

My question was met with heavy silence for a few long moments, before Zepp said, "I don't know. We know James Spencer never unlocked the drive, so he wouldn't have seen any of this. But he must have suspected it contained something valuable since he locked it away in his safe. Let me just say this, Jojo—" He paused, and the telltale crack of him opening what was undoubtedly an energy drink sounded through the phone. "—Knight would have been basically printing money with something like this. Owning all this tech, all the possibilities—it would have soared past the big

names like Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon. Left them in the dust. People have killed for less."

We all let that statement hang in the air. The familiar numbness was creeping through my body as I contemplated my parents' murder with this new information.

I needed to know what the other Families could have possibly known about my dad's secret work.

I needed to know if this was really it—the "why" I'd been asking all these years.

"Zepp," I said softly. "Can you keep what's on Dad's drive safe? Safer than it was?"

"Yes," he replied, and his confidence was a small comfort.

"I agree," Silver added. "Zepp's a little shit, but he's the best there is."

I blew out a breath, then I looked at Noah again.

His deep blue stare searched my face, and he squeezed my hand again before letting go to man his laptop once again. "Zepp, how long to download all of this to your system?"

"Two minutes."

"Silver," Noah went on, "when Zepp gives the okay, wipe the drive and corrupt it so it can't be used again. Same with the key."

"Yes, sir."

While we waited, Noah stood up from his chair and made his way around the desk. He lifted me from my own chair, slid into it, then pulled me down into his lap, wrapping his arms around me in a much-needed Noah cocoon.

"We'll get to the bottom of this, sweetheart," he whispered in my ear. "And I know it won't bring your parents back, but you now have the tools at your disposal to take over not just this City, but the whole world."

I didn't want the world. I wanted to bury the Families for what they'd done to us, and I wanted to keep the people I loved safe. That was it.

"All finished," Silver announced. "Signing off."

"Same here," Zepp chimed in. "It's all locked down with us now, Jojo. Just let us know how you want to proceed."

“I will,” I replied before the double beeps announced they’d both left the call.

I snuggled deeper into Noah’s arms. “The only person who might know even a tiny bit about this is Anders,” I said after a moment. “He was on my dad’s research team before my parents died, but he’s been pretty clueless and panicked about what James Spencer could possibly want with Dad’s drive.”

Noah hummed. “Maybe. Be careful if you speak to him, though, sweetheart. They really do watch him like a hawk.”

“Yeah.”

I jumped as Noah’s phone buzzed in his pocket that was currently located right under my ass. I lifted enough so he could slide the phone out, and he let out a string of curses as he looked at the screen.

“Fucking perfect. My dad’s in the City.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “Is he trying to see you?”

“Yes. Apparently my ignoring his phone calls for weeks finally forced him onto an airplane.”

“I…. I don’t like it, Noah.”

He pressed a kiss behind my ear. “I’m not going to let him get too close, sweetheart. But it looks like he may be trying to come on campus in the next day or two, and there’s only so much I can do to keep him away. Let me go see what I can make happen before he tries it.”

“Okay.” I climbed out of his lap, determined to pull myself together. When he stood up, I pulled him in for a deep kiss, which he returned with enthusiasm.

“Be safe,” I said.

“Always, sweetheart.”

He hustled out of his office, leaving me to sag against his desk.

I felt lost.

Pulling my phone out, I decided my search for answers wasn’t going to wait.

Me: Where is the most secure place we can meet?

Anders: Why? What’s happened?

Me: Just tell me

Anders: Knight Tower, now that you've taken it back. The penthouse is clear, I had it checked again recently. Your fingerprint should still work to access the Family elevator.

Me: Be there in 20

I was already walking out of the building, feeling my focus snap into place. I swiped to my last group message with Zach and Noah, sitting conveniently at the top of my texts.

Me: headed to KT to meet Anders, back in a few hours

I shoved my phone into the pocket of my sweatshirt, cinching my backpack tighter onto my shoulders as I speed-walked down the sidewalk toward the Academy's front entrance. The sun had dipped below the horizon a while ago, and the early-spring night air was chilly but not cold. It would be a comfortable walk and a quick train ride to Knight Tower where I'd hopefully be able to mine *something* from Anders to help me figure out what all this meant.

And I had a sinking feeling that once I found what I was looking for, it was going to be worse than I'd ever imagined.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

JOLIE



I braced myself as the elevator dinged, and the doors slowly opened to reveal my Family home—a place I hadn't been since the night I was ripped from my bed and my parents were murdered in front of me.

A small wave of relief hit me as I took it in. The Knight penthouse had apparently been extensively remodeled after we'd all died, so the debilitating pangs of nostalgia I'd expected to feel never surfaced. The marble tile of the foyer had been replaced with gleaming dark hardwood floors, and the classic chandelier that had lit the entryway was now made of sleek, modern metal. The colorful rugs my mom had favored were gone, and in their place were understated neutrals.

"Uncle Anders?" I called out.

"In the kitchen!"

I veered left, finding the formal dining room had been opened to an updated kitchen complete with all new appliances, white cabinets, and a gunmetal-gray tile backsplash. Anders paced behind the counter, his face looking even more gaunt than the last time I saw him. He wore a pale green dress shirt as though he'd just come from the office, and his thinning hair stuck out at odd directions like he'd been running his hand through it.

“Oh, there you are,” he said as I entered, still as jumpy as ever. “Have a seat.” He motioned to one of the sleek barstools parked at the kitchen counter.

“Like what you’ve done with the place,” I said mildly as I slipped onto the chair.

“What? Oh, yeah, I guess you haven’t been here since….” He lifted a glass of water to his lips and took a big gulp. “The Foundation paid to have the place redone. Hired a very well-known designer. I didn’t really pick anything out. But it’s… nice.”

“It is,” I agreed. While I didn’t love the idea that it had been so easy to erase my parents and me from our home, I understood why. I wouldn’t have wanted to rattle around this big place with the ghosts of my Family either.

He eyed me nervously. “So, what’s going on?”

“I wanted to ask you what you knew about what my dad was working on before he was murdered,” I said. “And who else might’ve known about it.”

His blue eyes went wide. “Why? Did you….” He gasped. “Did you find the key to Jeff’s drive?”

My inquisitive stare turned suspicious. “What do you know about what was on Dad’s flash drive?”

He’d stopped his pacing, and he now gripped the counter so hard, his knuckles were white. “I told you, Jolie. I just know that Spencer wanted what was on it very badly.”

“I’m aware, Uncle. My question is about Dad’s last… project. You were on his research team. How much did he tell you guys? Who else would have known what he was working on? Would he have talked about his work with the other heads of the Families when they met?”

He shook his head, resuming his pacing. He grabbed another glass from a cabinet, and he flitted around the kitchen before sliding a glass of ice water in front of me.

“Jeff had been very… secretive with his work,” he told me. “It hadn’t gone unnoticed by the rest of Knight and the other Families.”

I took a sip of water. This was getting me nowhere. “But you don’t know what he was working on or who else he might’ve told about it?”

He stilled again, leaning forward on the counter to squint at me. “The answers are on Jeff’s drive, Jolie. So, you *have* to tell me if you unlocked it so we can make a plan. What did you find? Did you bring it with you? Where was the key?”

I shook my head. Why was he being so demanding about this? “No, I didn’t bring it with me.”

He slammed a hand down on the counter. “Where is it? Where’s the flash drive and the encryption key, Jolie?”

Finally, a little alarm bell went off in my head.

Confusion swirled around me. “Why do you need to know that, Uncle? I can tell you it’s safe. All of it. Spencer will never get his hands on it.”

Anders stared at me. The flighty nerves, the flop sweat, the skittishness—it had all been replaced by an almost manic look of determination. “It would be better for both of us if you handed it over to me, Jolie. It would save us a lot of pain and heartache. So just tell me where you’re keeping the drive and the key.”

“No.” My head was fuzzy, and I needed to get the fuck out of here.

“*Jolie*.”

“No!” I barked, grabbing my backpack from the seat next to me. My gun was still tucked into the waistband of my pants under my sweatshirt, and I slid a knife from the pocket of my bag up under my sleeve. I hopped down from my chair, and the floor wobbled under my feet as I hit the ground.

What the fuck?

“Jolie, I’d advise you to sit back down. You might hurt yourself.”

This motherfucker had *drugged* me. I could feel it muddying my brain as I tried to steady myself.

This was bad.

The elevator dinged out in the foyer. I needed to pull my phone out of my pocket and call for help, but when four black-clad Enforcers—the personal guard that I’d allowed Anders to keep in *my* fucking tower—marched into the room, I needed to pull my gun from my pants more than I needed to grab my phone.

“Apprehend her, but keep her alive, please!” Anders yelled, still keeping the kitchen counter between all of us like the sniveling

coward he was.

I whipped my gun out, taking aim at the first guy into the room. My bullet hit him in the side of the neck instead of the head like I'd intended, but the room was tilting on its axis, so I was lucky to hit him at all. He dropped, and I shot at the next guy, nailing him in the shoulder.

The third Enforcer fired at me, and I dove behind the dining room table.

"Alive!" Anders screeched.

I rolled, attempting an army crawl under the table. The two not dead or injured Enforcers rushed at me, throwing chairs out of the way on a mission to drag me out from under my hiding spot.

I flopped onto my side to let loose several shots in their direction, emptying my magazine. My aim was shit for a few reasons at this point, so they were able to duck away without being hit before one of them dove to the floor and grabbed my leg.

"Motherfucker," I hissed, kicking him in the face with my free foot.

"Settle down, you little bitch," he growled, yanking on my leg.

I dropped my gun before I shimmied my knife down from where it was tucked under my sleeve and into the palm of my hand. I whirled with as much force as I could muster, slashing violently down at where the asshole gripped me around my ankle.

"Fucking shit!" he screamed as my strike somehow landed exactly where it needed to. I'd sliced right through his wrist, and he was going to bleed out in short order unless his buddies switched their attention from me to him.

He released me and collapsed just in time for Enforcer Number Four to kick my knife from my hand and grab me by the arm, hauling me out from under the table.

"Damn, this one is fucking feral," he grunted. "It's over, girl."

He swung a punch at my head that I managed to dodge, twisting my wrist from his grip and dropping to the floor. I crawled desperately toward where my knife had landed a few feet away, only to be jerked away again by my leg.

I rolled, kicking Mr. Bullet-in-his-Shoulder in the face. "Fuck!" he shouted as my sneaker crushed his nose, but he didn't release me.

I screamed, kicking and flailing as my vision began to dim. Big hands held my legs still, and another set pinned my arms, and I knew before a fist flew at my head that they had me.

Pain exploded through my skull, and everything went black.

CHAPTER THIRTY

BENNETT



It had been blind luck that I'd exited Holywell Hall about sixty seconds after Jolie, so I'd caught her determined march toward the front gates—fucking *alone* and in the dark—and it had filled me with a creeping sense of dread.

I'd been on my way to the student parking garage to grab my car after Elise had informed me that my presence had once again been requested at Spencer Tower. I knew it was fucking Harper's doing—I'd just come from dealing with the ridiculous and unnecessary fucking *mess* Jolie had made by breaking Harper's wrist and ending her crew season before it began.

The dean had threatened to expel Jolie, but it turned out that more of the women's crew team were scared of Jolie than they were of Harper these days, and the dean received a dozen witness statements indicating Harper had started the whole thing by attacking Jolie unprovoked.

It had all given me a headache, and I'd had to endure Harper crying all over my fucking shoulder in the dean's office before I'd managed to extricate myself, only to be summoned to a meeting with my father.

As I'd watched Jolie exit the campus alone, I'd found myself drifting after her. I followed her to the metro station and down to the platform for the train headed to the City center.

I abhorred the train, but I was already standing on the fucking platform, so I decided I'd kill two birds with one stone. I'd covertly watch Jolie's back—because apparently her *boyfriends* couldn't be bothered—while I also made my way toward Spencer Tower.

Her destination had been Knight Tower—not surprising, since she owned it now—but I still didn't like that she was out here alone on a random fucking school night. I didn't think my father had an active kill order out on her, but who knew what Peter or Andrea were up to now that she'd embarrassed the shit out of both of them.

Fucking reckless, as always, Jolie.

Spencer Tower was a few blocks away, and I was going to be late, but I found myself lingering in the coffee shop in the lobby of Knight Tower. I was putting off my meeting, and I was also hoping to get a glimpse of Jolie before she headed back out.

I planned on putting her in a rideshare straight back to the Academy no matter how many times she told me to go fuck myself.

My fingers itched. I pulled out my phone and opened our group chat.

Me: Do you know where your girlfriend is right now?

Noah answered after a minute.

Noah: She's meeting with Anders

Me: Why?

Noah: You'll have to ask her that

Motherfucker.

Spencer hadn't had much of a presence in Knight Tower even before Jolie took it all back, but the one thing my father had made sure of was that he could always keep tabs on Anders. I'd thought it was ridiculous—he was a harmless leashed dog, but Spencer kept a log of his movements nevertheless. Father had once told me, flippant and dismissive as ever, that *we* were the head of Knight, so we always knew what our mouthpiece was doing.

And I was pretty sure that hadn't changed even though Knight Tower now belonged to Jolie.

I opened the portal for Spencer security through the app on my phone and quickly found what I was looking for—the log of Anders's comings and goings. I scanned down to the last entry tonight, and a jolt of unease hit me right in the stomach.

Anders had unlocked the basement “workroom” with his fingerprint about ten minutes ago.

What the fuck was he doing down there, and where was Jolie?

I was in the elevator down to the parking garage before I could think twice.

Every Family tower had a basement workroom, though Ferrero preferred to do their dirty work at the Club. There was no reason for Anders to be down there—he didn’t do Enforcer work in any capacity.

Maybe Jolie had been attacked, and they’d dragged the offender to the basement?

My unease intensified.

I wound my way down to the third sublevel of the parking garage and let myself in the unmarked brown door next to an abandoned security hut. Inside, guarding the locked door to the workroom, was one of Anders’s personal guards.

Jones, Johnson. Something.

“Mr. Spencer?” he said, straightening against the wall and looking confused. “Did Mr. Nilsson send for you? He specifically told us not to inform Spencer yet.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Inform us of what, exactly?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “Um, well, I’ll have to wait for Mr. Nilsson’s go ahead to disclose that.”

I took two steps forward, crowding into his personal space. He was a big guy, as most Enforcers were, but I was bigger. “Is that a bullet in your shoulder, Jones?”

He looked down at his right shoulder where his black uniform had been soaked through with blood and a hasty patch had been placed over the wound. “Just got clipped in a scuffle with an intruder, sir.”

“Did they also break your nose?”

“Um. Affirmative, sir.”

My glare intensified. “You’re going to let me into the workroom. Now.”

“I, uh… I’m not authorized to do that, sir.”

“Wrong choice.” I lunged at him, jamming my thumb right into his bullet wound.

He cried out, but I slammed my other hand over his mouth. He struggled, but I could tell the blood loss he'd suffered had weakened him. He shook violently, and when he started to droop under the crushing weight of the pain, I threw my fist into his temple, knocking him out cold.

I caught his bulky body before he slid down the wall, then I made awkward work of lifting his hand to the fingerprint scanner next to the door. I slammed his thumb onto the scanner, and a soft beep and flash of a green light proceeded the thump of the lock disengaging.

I left Johnson in a heap on the floor, stripped of his weapon, and I crept inside. The cramped, dim landing contained two additional doors—one I knew led down to the open basement floor, and the other to a narrow staircase that allowed access to the small balcony that acted as storage area tucked up high along the back wall.

As much as the urge to barrel into the basement and demand to know what the fuck was going on rode me hard, I unlatched the door to the balcony staircase and prowled silently up the stairs.

I slipped through the shadows, a particular skill of mine despite my size, and the dimly lit basement room came into view below me. There, in the middle of the bare open floor, surrounded by rectangular solid cement columns that held up the cramped ceiling, was Jolie.

She was strapped to a chair, hands bound behind her back, and her head sagged against her chest. On one side of her head, blood soaked into her white-blonde hair.

I sucked in a breath, a tremor wracking my body as I fought to remain still and silent. It was like I was back there again.

That night.

The night I'd thought I'd watched her close those beautiful eyes for the last time.

"Wake her up."

Only then did I notice Anders, the little fucking weasel, standing off to the side next to a single Enforcer—another member of his guard.

"You're gonna let me get the tool chest out, right?" the Enforcer asked, stalking forward toward Jolie. "She killed Martin and Alex. You should've dosed her with more of that shit."

“I only *dosed* her to loosen her tongue,” Anders snapped. “Four of you should have been able to handle a teenage girl without a problem. Ridiculous.”

He did what? My hands clenched into fists, digging my blunt nails into the skin of my palm so hard, I was certain I’d drawn blood.

The Enforcer waved something in front of Jolie’s nose, and her head snapped back as she took a big, shuddering breath.

“What the fuck, Anders!” she barked, yanking on her bindings, and she sounded so much like normal, angry Jolie that I was able to release one one-hundredth of the tension that had wound me into a vibrating ball of rage.

“Jolie, honestly,” Anders said with his usual whine. “You didn’t have to make this so difficult. You did what you were supposed to do—you found the key to Jeff’s drive. All you need to do is hand it over, and I really think we’ll all be able to put this behind us.”

“It’s not fucking happening, *Uncle*,” she spat.

He *tsk*ed, shaking his head in disappointment. “You don’t want to do that, Jolie. Morris over here is itching to make you hurt for what you did to his buddies. If you just tell me where the drive and the key are, I’ll let you out of here unharmed.”

I watched as Jolie smothered the boiling fury, and a blank expression settled onto her face.

Good girl.

“Why, Uncle?” she asked softly. “You knew what my dad had done, didn’t you? Did you want his discovery for yourself? Did you want to take the credit from him? Or did James Spencer put you up to it? Were you just his pawn, even then?”

Anders scoffed, puffing up his chest. “Of course not, silly girl. I was the mastermind behind it all, and Spencer and the others would already be little specks in the oppressive shadow of your father if it wasn’t for me!”

Jolie pasted a confused look on her face. “Why would my father’s success be a bad thing for *you*? I’m sure you’d have been rewarded if you worked on the team that made the discovery.”

“Not enough!” he shouted. “Spencer and the others could offer me what my sister and her brilliant, *clueless* husband would never—the head of Knight itself. A seat at the table of the fabled Four

Families of Saint Gabriel City. Power beyond anyone's wildest dreams."

What the fuck?

"So, instead of sharing in the greatest technological discovery of the century with my Family, you sold us out to the other three? And they just decided to murder us all to steal my dad's work?"

He scoffed, his thin arms gesturing wildly as he rambled. "It wasn't a hard sell. Jeff had already become such a thorn in the side of the Families. Knight was already outstripping the others—tech is such a lucrative field, as you know. And he'd been making all this noise for years about how the Families needed to go legit, no more criminal activity, blah blah blah. The other three already thought he'd grown too big for his britches—too big for the institution of the Four to be sustainable. But throw in the fact that he'd kept the miraculene breakthrough a secret for years? That he was going to become the richest man on the planet by a long shot without even a whisper of it to the others? Without offering them an equal cut, at the very least?" He paused, shaking his head like a disappointed parent. "Well, they took that personally."

The pieces were clicking together in my brain faster than I could make sense of them. I felt a numbness wash over me, my body deploying its usual defense mechanism as I fought to remain still and in control.

I focused everything on Jolie.

My angel. So brave. So fierce.

She was struggling to keep her cool. I'd committed her every expression and mannerism to memory by now, and while she kept an emotionless mask, I knew she wasn't going to be able to stall much longer.

"So, your plan was to turn all of my dad's work over to the Families, and they promised you the true head of Knight and, what, an equal cut of the spoils?" Jolie gritted her teeth, her nostrils flaring. "You had your *sister* and your *niece* murdered for *that*?"

"Obviously my niece was not, in fact, murdered," he said, waving a dismissive hand at her. "And I'm not inclined to try again—it really is nasty business—but you'll need to turn over the miraculene files and step down as head of Knight. You're already rich enough, and I

know you don't actually want to be part of the Families anyway. You hate them."

"So, what went wrong then?" she spat, now taunting him. "Clearly you were not made head of Knight, and my dad's work just sat in Spencer's safe all these years. Did you forget you needed the fucking key before you had my Family *executed*?"

"It was supposed to be on his private drive on the Knight server," he snapped. "I'd watched him unlock the miraculene files before. But he switched it last minute or something. Of course he did! Your dad's laughing at me from beyond the grave, giving me just another patronizing, 'Good try, buddy.' Well, guess what, *Jeff?* I'm getting the key *tonight*, and then all my hard work will pay off. I'll finally be out of this fucking prison, and I'll be more of a king of the world than you ever were."

Jolie gaped at him like he was the dumbest human on the planet, and I agreed with her. "And that's it? You're sure James Spencer will keep his word to you?"

"Elise promised me!" he barked. "She saw the potential in me and what we could do with miraculene if it was *ours*. And as soon as I'm the true head of Knight and one of the four richest people in the world, she'll come back to me, and we'll be getting married. I'll continue the Knight line myself."

Jolie continued to stare at him, her dubious look clearly genuine. "Elise Proctor?"

"Of course."

That was it.

I'd had enough.

Gripping the railing, I vaulted over the side and swung down, dropping the eight feet to the unforgiving cement floor behind Jolie with a loud thud.

I stood up from my crouch, and I dusted my suit jacket off before I set my sights on Anders.

He'd jumped back, startled by my falling from the ceiling, and his wide eyes took me in before his shoulders slumped in relief.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Spencer. I told them not to send word until I had the drive, but I suppose it's good you're here. You can help me convince my niece to make the right decision."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

JOLIE



My whole body seized. If James Spencer was here, it was going to make escape that much harder. Anders seemed slightly more reluctant to kill me than he apparently had been when I was *eleven years old*, but James Spencer would blow my head off just for annoying him at this point.

But then *Bennett* stepped into the dim light next to my chair.

His face was cold—ruthless, even—and I wondered where he'd come from and how much of that total fucking tragedy he'd overheard. He didn't acknowledge me where I sat, still strapped to a chair, bleeding from the head, and reeling from what I'd just learned. Instead, he calmly reached into his suit jacket, and in the blink of an eye, he'd pulled his Glock and put a bullet in the head of Anders's lone remaining bodyguard.

"What are you doing?" Anders shrieked, taking an alarmed step backward as his Enforcer dropped to the ground like a rag doll. "I'm about to get everything your father has wanted for these last seven and a half years!"

Bennett advanced on him. "You and my father and the others murdered the Knights for *money*?" he said, his voice low and deceptively calm. "You sold out your own *sister* so you could pretend to be a king of the City? So Elise Proctor would fuck you?"

"Bennett, I-I…," Anders stammered, still scampering backwards.

“You all took Jolie away from me—from *us*—just so you could steal something that didn’t belong to you?” Bennett continued matter-of-factly.

“You don’t understand the amount of money we’re talking about here, son. The Families would rule the *world* with what Knight tried to keep for itself.”

Bennett just nodded, like he was taking it all in.

“See? I knew you’d get it—”

And those were the last words Anders ever mumbled.

With a savage roar, Bennett flew at him, taking him to the ground in one swift move, and I could only sit there and watch—tied up as I was—with deep, burning satisfaction as Bennett took out every ounce of anger, hurt, and frustration he’d felt over these past seven years on Anders’s face.

He slammed his fists into him again and again, the crack of his skull and the crunch of his bones echoing in the empty basement room. Anders’s screams ended quickly, but Bennett went on forever, his breathing becoming labored and his shoulders sagging as he fought to pound Anders into an unrecognizable pile of flesh.

“Bennett,” I said in a low voice after a few minutes. “That’s enough. He’s gone.”

He kept on.

“Bennett!” I shouted. “It’s over. Come untie me, please. I… I need you.”

That finally broke through his haze. He stood up, kicking Anders’s bloody body with his shiny dress shoe, then he rushed to my side like he’d only just remembered I was here.

“Fuck, I’m sorry,” he whispered. He shucked his now blood-spattered navy suit jacket and tossed it aside before he crouched behind me. I heard the *snick* of a pocketknife flipping open, then the zip ties binding my wrists snapped free.

I stood on wobbly legs, shaking out my arms. My head was clear and had been since I came to, but I needed to get the blood flowing to my limbs again. I sucked in a deep breath, and I felt my adrenaline finally began to ebb as Bennett stepped in front me.

I stared up into his handsome face, needing him to be my anchor before the reality of what I’d learned tonight crushed me completely.

He'd wiped the blood and sweat from his body as best he could, and now he stared down at me with nothing but utter devastation in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Jolie," he whispered. "I'm so, *so* sorry."

I wasn't even sure what he was apologizing for. His refusal to let go of his loyalty to the Families? The appalling, empty reason for my parents' death? The time we'd lost together?

My lip trembled.

"I will spend every waking minute for the rest of my life making them pay," he went on, the violence threaded through that harsh whisper feeding my damaged soul.

A lone tear leaked from my eye.

"Bennett," I croaked as my body shook.

He reached for me, pulling me into his arms and lifting me high so that I could wrap my legs around his waist. He held me so tight, and I knew I was safe.

I buried my face in the crook of his neck. "Bennett," I cried, feeling the tears flowing freely now. "They killed them."

"I know, Angel," he whispered, his voice hitching. "I know."

"They just shot them. And I was right there. I was so scared."

"You were so brave, baby. So fucking brave."

I sobbed into his shoulder. I let it all go. All seven fucking years of it, and his hold on me never faltered. I felt him lower us into the chair, keeping me wrapped tightly around him as he sat.

"They murdered my parents for money, Bennett. They took my mom and dad from me. And they took you and Zach and Noah too. For *money*. To get even richer than they already were!"

He sniffed. "I should've looked harder for you. I should've asked more questions. I should have fucking done *something* more."

I finally peeled my snotty, wet face from his shoulder so I could look him in his haunting green eyes. He stared back at me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered, and I cupped his handsome face as I ran my thumbs across his cheeks, wiping away his tears.

"Don't cry, Bennett," I whispered. "I'm here now. We won't let them win."

"I'm so sorry, Angel," he said again. "Fuck, I missed you so much."

I managed a watery smile. “I missed you too. I’m glad you don’t hate me.”

He frowned. “Hate you? Are you out of your mind? I *love* you.”

Another sob escaped me. “What?”

“You heard me. I *love* you, Jolie Knight. More than anything in the whole fucking world. I’m finished making excuses for why I can’t have you.”

“Bennett,” I breathed. His declaration was a balm on my soul that had been shredded so brutally tonight. And I was exhausted—too exhausted to fight against what I knew was in my heart and had been since I was a child. “I love you too. I’ve always needed you. You’re a part of me.”

“You have me, Angel.”

With one last sob, I pressed my lips to his. Kissing Bennett was everything I’d ever dreamed of—even in this dank, cold basement in the presence of two dead bodies. He took control right away, consuming me, moving my head where he wanted it so he could devour me just right.

I busied my hands with the buttons of his dress shirt. I wasn’t about to get either of us naked down here, but I wanted to feel his skin.

He growled, nipping at my lip as I finally got his shirt open, and my greedy hands immediately found their way to his sculpted chest.

“Wait, what is this?” I said, stilling as I took in the skin under my hands.

“It’s you, Angel.”

Bennett had a beautiful, *giant* tattoo spanning his entire chest. Intricately detailed feathers, their silvery color sparkling even in the basement’s dim light, covered his skin and created two glorious angel wings that spread from either side of his sternum.

“You got this for me?” I whispered, running my fingertips reverently over the gorgeous art.

“I did. After we lost you, we coped by thinking of you as our angel, happy and safe in heaven with your parents. You were always going to be my angel, even when we outgrew those childish fantasies and became the cynical bastards we are now. I wanted to

keep you with me always, so when I turned eighteen, I had this done. I actually finished it last year."

"I…," I began, tears running down my face again. "I'm so sorry I didn't try harder to tell you I was alive. I can't believe I worked so hard to forget you when you kept me with you all this time."

He shook his head, wiping my tears away with gentle fingers. "I understand why, Jolie. I have you now, and that's all that matters."

"Yes," I whispered, diving back in again to take his mouth. He'd hardened under me a while ago, and now I was on a mission.

I was going to have Bennett, undesirable location and dead bodies be damned. I wouldn't let fucking Anders stand in the way of anything that belonged to me ever again, and Bennett fucking *belonged* to me.

As he cradled my face and kissed me like he needed me to breathe, I worked his zipper open.

"Fuck, Angel," he bit out as I wrapped my hand around his—Jesus, *massive*—cock. "You make me crazy. I want you so fucking bad, but I'm not sure this is the place."

"Shut up and fuck me, Bennett," I growled against his lips.

His hand snapped to my throat, his grip firm as bossy, intense Bennett came back online. "Fine. But I want time with you alone, in a bed, as soon as we leave this place, so I can show you what I can *really* do to your body. Your other boyfriends are not invited."

"Fine," I snapped back at him, which quickly turned into a gasp as he used the strong fingers of his other hand to tear my leggings at the seam of the crotch. "Oh fuck."

Those deft fingers swiped my soaking panties out of the way and buried themselves inside me. "Fuck, there it is," he rasped up against my ear. "Just like I remembered. Tight, hot, wet—perfect for my cock."

"Give it to me, Bennett," I demanded, moaning as he pumped his fingers just right.

"Take it, then, Angel."

Gladly. I swatted his hand away before I pulled his thick, hard dick from his pants. I shifted my hips forward and lined him up with my entrance, then I sank down onto him in one slow, painstaking movement.

We groaned in unison. Bennett stretched me to my limit, but the pain quickly gave way to pleasure. I knew as soon as I gave a tentative rock of my hips that I was going to come way too quickly.

“That’s it, baby. Take what you need from me,” he said, wrapping his big hands around my hips as he helped me move in his lap. He held my eyes with his, those mossy orbs now hooded and glazed with lust. “I’m yours.”

“I’m yours too, Bennett,” I said on a moan, picking up the pace. “Fuck, your dick is huge.”

“And you’re taking me so well, Angel,” he crooned, now dragging his lips down the column of my neck as I rode him. “You were made for me. I want you to remember how my cock makes you feel. How much you love being stuffed full of me. Remember that you’re mine.”

All my boyfriends had such dirty fucking mouths, and I loved it.

I continued to move, pushing myself higher and higher. “Bennett,” I whimpered. “I’m so close.”

“Fuck yes. Come for me, Angel.”

He rocked my hips in a fast rhythm as he thrust up into me, and I detonated in his lap, my scream echoing through the cavernous room. I felt my muscles grip him, pleasure overtaking me until black dots danced across my vision. Bennett groaned as he found his own release, burying his face in my chest as he came.

I sagged into his arms, and he shifted instantly back into holding me like a precious treasure. I sank into the feeling, safe and secure and loved in Bennett’s embrace, and I let the events of the night finally settle in my mind.

Anders had died the death he deserved for betraying his own flesh and blood for a taste of wealth and power. Now Peter, Andrea, and James fucking Spencer would pay. The dancing around the corporate board rooms was over. The Shadows would come out to play, and it was going to be a fucking *war*.

Bennett must have been having the same thoughts. “I love you, Angel,” he murmured in my ear. “I’m going to destroy my father for what he’s done to you.”

“I love you too. Let me have Elise.”

“With pleasure.”

We began to right our clothes, and I was thankful my sweatshirt fell to mid-thigh and would hide the hole Bennett had made in the crotch of my pants. Bennett used his crumpled suit jacket to clean us up before zipping himself back into his pants and buttoning his shirt. Still, we lingered, Bennett holding me in that godforsaken metal chair while both of us ignored the world that was about to fall apart around us.

Finally, our peaceful bubble was shattered as the door to the basement was kicked open, and three hulking bodies dressed for battle streamed in.

I recognized them instantly.

“Oh, well isn’t this cozy?” Max said, pulling to a stop and dropping his weapon to his side. He pulled his balaclava down to expose his face. “Did you two finally kiss and make up?”

“Yes,” I muttered, not bothering to lift my head from Bennett’s warm chest.

Noah ran in behind Max, making a beeline for me. He knelt next to our chair, running a gloved hand over my cheek and examining me closely, a worried look on his face. “Are you hurt, sweetheart?”

“I’m fine,” I whispered. “Though my pussy is gonna be sore. Bennett’s fucking huge.”

Noah’s face split into a wide grin. “So he’s said.” He looked at Bennett, who still refused to release me. “Finally, man.”

He just grunted, snuggling me tighter.

A low whistle sounded. “Shit,” Dom said from where he stood over the bloody pulp that had once been Anders. “Is that who I think it is? Anyone want to enlighten me?”

“Later,” Bennett decreed like he was in charge here. “Jolie needs to go home. She may need stitches in her head.”

Dom sighed, exasperated. “Again, honey?”

“Sorry, Dom,” I called before I asked Max, “How’d you guys know where to find us?”

“Big Man sent the SOS to Niall over here, and he had Silver get in touch with Zepp, who called us. Got here as fast as we could, though your boy seemed to think he had it in hand.”

I felt Bennett shrug. “I did.”

“He did,” I agreed.

Noah pulled his phone from his pocket. “I’ll get Zach’s cleanup crew down here. He’ll be sorry he missed the fun, but he wasn’t on campus when Bennett texted us, so I left without him.”

I finally coaxed Bennett into letting me stand up, seeing as how we would both need to walk out of here sooner rather than later. He got to his feet with a groan, and he wrapped his arm around my shoulders while I clung to Noah’s arm.

Noah’s phone buzzed in his hand, and his eyebrows jumped to his hairline as he saw who was calling. “Hello? Frankie?”

I stilled. It was obvious Frankie didn’t normally place calls to Noah’s phone.

Noah’s face paled as he listened, and I felt the panic set in again.

He hung up, then he looked at Bennett and me.

“Zach’s missing.”



To be continued…

BONUS SCENE

ZACH GOES TO JOLIE'S HOUSE



I rang the buzzer next to the weathered blue door. It had taken me a minute, but I'd located the entrance to Jojo's family's apartment around the corner from the front of the bookstore where her adoptive mom made her living. Behind this door were stairs leading up to the small apartment above the bookstore. This was where our girl had spent the last seven years of her life in the arms of a loving new family who had put her back together piece by piece.

Now I needed her to put me—and Bennett and Noah—back together in the same way. Losing her had fucking broken us, and she was our cure and our salvation.

I was being a forward, cocky little shit by showing up here, but that was my default setting as Ferrero Heir.

Plus, I was on a mission.

Nothing was going to stop me from holding my Princess tonight—not even her adoptive father, whom the boys and I were mildly shocked to discover we found *kinda* intimidating.

The door opened, and I was treated to the stupid, smug face of Jojo's adoptive brother, Max, who was wearing only flannel pajama pants.

"Can I help you?"

I returned his bullshit with a confident smirk of my own. Nobody would keep Zach Ferrero from where he wanted to be, and right now

he wanted to be wrapped around his girl in her bed. “I’m here to tuck Jojo in, just like I said I would be. Let me up.”

His lazy grin was full of ice. “Sure, if that’s what my sister wants.” He turned to shout up the stairs. “Jojo! Ferrero’s here to see you! Should I let him up or toss him out on his ass?”

After some harried stomping noises, I heard, “*What?*”

Max just chuckled before turning back to me. “If you hurt her, Ferrero, I will break you into tiny fucking pieces and feed you to the river rats. I don’t give a fuck who you are or who your Family is. I will end you.”

The balls on this asshole. “Cute. But I think you’re aware that Jojo doesn’t need your help to fuck up my world if I ever did something to deserve it.”

His grin turned more genuine. “Bet. At least you’re not a total idiot.”

My retort was cut off by the sounds of bare feet hitting the stairs, then Jojo appeared over Max’s shoulder, looking flushed and perfect in her silky jammies. “Zach? You really came?”

“Of course I did, Princess.”

“Um, okay, then.” She nudged Max’s shoulder. “Let him up. He can explain himself to Dom and Laura, I guess.”

I shot Max my triumphant grin, and he rolled his eyes before making a show of reluctantly stepping aside. Clearly, I did not beat him hard enough at Dom’s gym earlier today.

Jojo eyed me with guarded suspicion as I stepped into her personal space in that narrow stairwell, halting on the step below where she stood. “I take it you’ve never had to *meet the parents* before, Ferrero?”

“I have not.”

She quirked a blonde brow. “Nervous?”

I probably should’ve been. There were four people in this City who didn’t give a flying fuck that I was Zach Ferrero, son of Andrea Ferrero and Heir of the Four Families, and they all lived here in this apartment.

“Nope,” I replied. “I know I’m where I need to be. Lead the way, Princess.”

The way her pale cheeks flushed was only just visible in the dim light of the stairwell, and it took great effort on my part to refrain from pumping my fist in the air.

She turned and made her way up to the second floor, and I did *not* refrain from staring at her tight, round ass in her tiny sleep shorts as she climbed the stairs in front of me.

"Make it less obvious next time, Ferrero," Max groused under his breath behind me.

"Get used to it, Miller," I retorted just as quietly. "Your *sister* is a fucking smoke show, and I'll be appreciating her ass forever because I'm here to stay."

"You fucking better be."

Well, then.

Max Miller—unexpected ally.

Noted.

Jojo pushed open the heavy black door at the stop of the stairs, and the three of us trekked into the apartment.

It was… small. Definitely small. Jojo's parents' bathroom in the penthouse she grew up in was as big as the entire living room and kitchen of this place.

The front door opened into a cramped living room containing a large worn leather couch and an equally well-loved armchair. The space was set apart by a faded-but-still-colorful rug, and a nice flat-screen TV hung on the wall.

Beyond the living room was a small kitchen with dark-stained cabinets and appliances that looked at least sort of new. A square wooden table sat in the corner next to glass doors that presumably led to a balcony, a vase of fresh flowers sitting proudly on top of it, and a hallway branched off the wall between the living room and the kitchen.

The apartment may have been small, but it was also… *homey,* and that was a thought I'd never had entering my own massive penthouse atop Ferrero Tower.

Something loosened in my chest. I'd known my Jojo had been rescued by the grace of God on the worst night of our lives and taken in by a new family that cared for her, but seeing their cozy, lovingly decorated apartment, with pictures on the walls of Jojo and

Max and their parents and the faint smell of a vanilla candle lingering in the air, gave me the reassurance I'd apparently needed that she'd been safe and happy here.

"Hey, Dom and Laura," Jolie said as we approached the kitchen where her adoptive dad and mom sat on stools at the bar top, both in their robes and drinking something that smelled like mint tea. "Um, this is Zach Ferrero. Dom, you might remember him from his little surprise visit to the gym earlier today? He's here for a… sleepover with me. And Max."

Max snorted behind us. I ignored him and stepped to Jojo's side, clasping her hand in mine. I reached forward, offering my other hand to Dom, who eyed me with something close to amusement as he shook it.

"Sorry to drop in unannounced, sir. *Again*," I added with what I hoped was a sheepish grin. "I wasn't ready to spend the weekend away from Jojo. We only just got her back, as you know."

He grunted, nodding, while Laura let out a dreamy sigh next to him. "Aw, that's so sweet. She missed you boys too. She really did."

"*Laura*," Jojo whined.

I smiled at my new favorite mom as I shook her hand. "We missed her too, Mrs. Miller. We weren't complete without her, but now that she's back with us, we're not going to let her go."

"Tell that to Bennett," Jojo muttered under her breath.

"Oh my gosh, I am so happy to hear that," Laura went on. "Our Jojo deserves all the love in her life, don't you think, Dom?"

Dom quirked a dark eyebrow at Jolie before turning his intense gaze to me. The guy was the spitting image of his son except that his hair was short and graying at the temples, crinkles graced the corners of his eyes, and he had about twenty extra pounds of muscle. He had the look of a guy who'd been some places and seen some shit.

I would hesitate to get into the cage with that man, and I'd never had that thought about anyone.

"Our Jojo deserves *everything*," he rumbled as he held my stare. "Everything she wants."

I didn't miss his meaning. Jojo had come out of hiding and declared war on the Families—on my mom. She deserved to take

back what was stolen from her. She deserved vengeance against the people who murdered her parents.

“I couldn’t agree more, sir,” I replied, serious as the fucking grave.

He considered me for one moment more, then with a small nod, he broke our stare-off to give Jojo a warm fatherly smile. “I’m happy to have Zach here if you are, honey. Just don’t stay up too late—you had an eventful day.”

I frowned at her. “What else happened today—”

“Got it. Night, guys!” Jojo said, cutting me off as she dragged me away from the kitchen, a snickering Max on our heels.

We shuffled down the little hallway and through the door to the tiny room she shared with Max. As the door clicked shut behind me, I took in the space where my Jojo had slept every night since the day we thought we’d lost her forever.

A set of bunk beds sat against the room’s lone, small window. The soft yellow glow of the streetlamp outside was just visible through the blinds. A single dresser had been shoved against the opposite wall, and an adjacent sliding door marked where the one closet likely was.

Max’s clothes were strewn about the floor and on the lower bunk, which was unmade. The top bunk was neater, and its lavender quilt said it was Jojo’s bunk and my bed for the night.

“This is adorable, Princess. Are you ready for bed?”

Max threw his large body onto the lower bunk. “I keep a knife under my pillow, Ferrero,” he announced with a vicious smile. “I don’t know what game you’re playing with my sister, but if you try anything tonight, I will come up there and end your life.”

“*Max*,” Jolie groaned. “Stop threatening the Heirs on my behalf. I love you and would prefer not to have to maim Zach or the others in your defense. What you two put me through today at Dom’s gym was entirely enough.”

I tugged her closer and brought her hand to my lips. I kissed her, reveling in her blush and Max’s scowl, and then I released her with a nudge toward the ladder on the side of the bunks. “He can goad me all he wants, baby girl. We’ll keep our shit in the cage where Dom can supervise, yeah?”

She sighed and began to climb the ladder. “Fine. I guess you’ll make each other better fighters, and I can live with that.”

As I approached the ladder to follow her up, I smirked at Max and gave him the finger. He feigned shock before he mimed grabbing my finger out of the air and sticking it in his pocket.

I rolled my eyes, finished with him for the night, and I hoisted myself into my girl’s little bed, shucking my sweatshirt before sliding under the covers with her. As I did every night when I climbed into her bed, I positioned myself between her and the door, pulling her into my chest and wrapping my body around her.

I felt the tension leave her body, and my heart soared with victory.

“I can’t believe you really came here,” she whispered into my shirt.

“I said I would. You didn’t believe me?”

I felt her shrug against me. “I don’t know what to believe anymore, Zach. You guys are… confusing.”

I hummed softly, taking the opportunity to stroke the silky skin of her bare shoulder with my fingertips. “We’ll earn your trust back, Jojo. Don’t worry about any of that right now. Just sleep—I’ll keep you safe.”

She huffed. “I’ll keep *you* safe, Ferrero.”

“I believe you, Princess.”

And I think I love you, I thought like a sappy, pathetic fool.

She melted into me, and then all the bullshit faded away.

This was my girl. *Our* girl.

I would never let her go again.

KILL THE KING

A KNIGHT'S REVENGE BOOK 3



PROLOGUE

ZACH - AGE 12



I wasn't sure how long I'd been in the basement of Ferrero Tower, but it felt like several days had passed.

I ran my gaze around the dull cement walls of my surroundings for the millionth time since I'd been shoved into this little room. I hadn't known Ferrero Tower had a dungeon in its basement, but I wasn't surprised.

I was learning a whole lot of terrible stuff about my Family since I'd been forced to watch my mom commit murder while my best friend lay bleeding and dying on the floor in front of us.

With nothing else to do but wait, I counted the cracks in the wall again and then the metal bars of the door. I was bored, but being bored was better than being beaten. I was sure Ramon and his Enforcer buddies had run off to tell my mom I hadn't learned my lesson yet, but they would definitely be back.

Or maybe they were still pissed I'd bitten Rogers' finger off, but screw that guy. He'd deserved it for letting a twelve-year-old kid get the drop on him.

Probably because I'd been thinking about my visitors right then, the clank of the lock sounded, and the hinges creaked as the door began to open, announcing the arrival of whomever had come down here to torment me now.

Expecting Ramon or his team of assholes, I got a little jolt of surprise as my mom waltzed through the door, her shiny black high heels clacking loudly against the smooth, bare floor.

“Oh, my sweet baby,” she said with a little scandalized gasp. She hustled over to where I sat on the floor, my back propped against the cold wall because I’d refused to take even a little comfort in that joke of a cot they kept in here. “What have they done to you, Zachary?”

“What you ordered them to do, Mom,” I said dully.

She crouched in front of me, the slit in her skirt only just allowing her the movement. I gave her a blank stare as she caressed my face, taking in my puffy, swollen eye and the cut on my forehead. My face throbbed, my body ached, and I was pretty sure I had a cracked rib. I hurt, and I was pissed, but nothing they’d done to me was serious or life-threatening.

Nothing that would permanently scar the beloved Ferrero Heir.

Not physically, anyway.

“Baby, you know I don’t want any of this,” she cooed at me, forcing a concerned look onto her pale, flawless face. “But we have rules in this Family, first and foremost of which is that my commands are to be followed without question. I only want what’s best for you. For *us*, Zachary.”

“Sure, Mom.”

She stroked my shaggy, dark hair, greasy from sweat and going a few days without a shower—not that skipping a shower was unusual for me. I smelled ripe, and I hoped my mom was really offended by my stench.

“Now, I think it’s time for this nonsense to end,” she said, standing up. “I’ve taken the liberty of confiscating all of your possessions from the Knight girl. The pictures on your cell phone have been deleted as well.”

Despair consumed me. I shut my eyes and threw my head back against the wall.

That was all I had left of her.

Mom went on, unmoved by my distress. “The Knights were traitors, Zachary. You need to accept this now and purge them from your life. You will not hang onto any childish fantasies that pretend otherwise. That is why I had Ramon’s team search your room. It is

not okay for you to stab my Enforcers in the leg with kitchen knives when they are carrying out my orders."

I said nothing.

She reached for my wrist and jerked me to standing. I let her because I didn't care anymore.

"Let's go home," she said, her voice light and breezy like she'd suggested we go get ice cream. "I know you'll be a good boy for me from now on, won't you?"

Fat chance.

I'd have to try harder not to get caught, though.

"Yes, Mom."

"That's my baby! I know you'll always do what's best for our Family in the end. That's how I raised you, after all."

She clutched my arm as I limped out of my little cell, following her through the bowels of the basement and to the elevator.

My mom could have her Enforcers smack me around all she wanted. I was never going to forget my best friend. I was never, *ever* going to call her a traitor.

And I was never going to be Mom's perfect little soldier. I'd play the part, but I looked after myself, Bennett, and Noah now.

Screw Ferrero. Screw the Families.

They broke my *real* family, and someday, they would face the consequences.

CHAPTER ONE

ZACH - PRESENT DAY



Ramon's hard, emotionless face took up my entire field of vision as he knelt in front of me. To anyone who didn't know him, he looked as blank as he always did when he worked—directing Ferrero Enforcers, hovering around my mom, carrying out orders—but I could make out the excited glint in his eyes.

He fucking loved giving me what he thought I deserved, and he hadn't been given this chance in years.

"Your mother has done nothing but give you everything you could have ever wanted, and this is how you repay her?"

I spat a wad of bloody saliva in his face, and he buried his fist in my gut. "You ungrateful little shit."

I coughed. It hurt, but honestly, I'd had worse. Max Miller had hit me harder, and I'd enjoyed that shit. Ramon was getting soft in his old age.

"Is that the best you've got, motherfucker?" I rasped. "My girlfriend can throw a better punch than that. You better get it all out now, because I'm going to break every bone in your fucking body before this is over."

He scoffed at me before standing to launch a hard kick to my side, and I coughed again as I bit off a groan. He spat, "You'll be lucky if your mother lets you out of Ferrero Tower after this, boy. I

suggest you think long and hard about how you're going to grovel for her forgiveness."

I snorted out a laugh. Mom was still delusional after all these years.

She still thought these tricks could break me. That they could keep me in line and force my loyalty to Ferrero.

That I didn't have any power beyond what she allowed me to have.

I tracked Ramon's path back to the middle of the empty warehouse where I was being held under the watchful eyes of at least ten Ferrero Enforcers. They'd smartened up over the years, apparently, because they'd locked my arms securely behind my back with good old-fashioned chains since I'd long ago learned to break zip ties. The chains looped around my wrists, securing me to the cold metal pole I'd been reclining against for the past twenty-four hours or so.

I'd also gotten a bit better at figuring out how much time had passed during these little episodes, tracking the comings and goings of what was left of Ferrero's highest-level Enforcers as they'd entered and exited in shifts during my confinement.

So far only Ramon had the privilege of beating on me. I guessed he was pretty pissed that I'd killed five of the eight guys Mom had sent after me before they'd managed to take me.

Ramon approached again, kneeling to offer me a drink from a new bottle of water. They'd also allowed me a few energy bars during my stay, and I'd eaten them. I was no longer the dumb kid who threw a tantrum and went on a hunger strike when I was being punished like this.

I needed my strength because I was going to end everyone in this fucking room for making my Princess worry.

And I knew when I didn't show up to her bed last night or answer any calls today, she was going to go off. My baby girl loved me, even if we hadn't said those words yet, and she was not to be fucked with when she was angry.

"If you think your little girlfriend is going to come save your ass," Ramon said, yanking the water bottle from my lips after I'd drunk half

of it, “I have bad news for you. We have a small army set up on the bridge. No one’s getting through.”

That confirmed what I’d suspected—I was in some nondescript, off-the-books warehouse in Industrial City. I’d been in and out of almost every Ferrero cell and torture space over the years, and I knew this wasn’t one of our properties in the City. Instead, we were in the rundown, uninhabited area to the east of the river, made up mostly of shipping containers and dilapidated warehouses. It was accessible from the City by a single narrow bridge or by the occasional container ship that parked at the docks to the north.

I hadn’t known that Ferrero held any property over here, but I knew for a fact that Hargraves had storage facilities somewhere in Industrial City where it kept some of its less-than-legal *medicinal* products.

I eyed Ramon, giving him my most unaffected stare. “Tell Mom she’s really fucked up this time. I’m not a kid anymore—she can’t have you beat loyalty into me. And if one hair is harmed on my girl’s head because of this stupidity, I will burn Ferrero Tower to the fucking ground with all of you in it.”

Ramon shook his head like he was my disappointed dad. “She’ll be so ashamed. You can kiss all the freedom she’s so graciously given you all these years goodbye.”

I snorted. *Freedom—is that what we’re calling it?*

“Let me have a shot at him, boss!” Anderson yelled from the group guarding the entrance. “He killed our fucking team lead.”

I sent a savage grin in his direction. “He washed out, Anderson. If you let your mark steal your gun and get your head blown off in an eight-versus-one fight, then you clearly can’t hack it as a Ferrero Enforcer.”

Ramon slammed a fist into my side. “Shut the fuck up. I’ve had enough of your mouth and your attitude to last a hundred goddamn years.”

I stifled a pained groan. He’d already nailed me on that side once, and if I didn’t already have a broken rib, I probably did now.

As Ramon stalked off again, I felt the chill of the night seep into the stark warehouse floor. I was thankful I’d managed to get my long-sleeved T-shirt and sweatpants onto my body after my shower and

before Ramon's team of assholes had burst into my room in our penthouse, but I definitely wasn't wearing shoes. I was not looking forward to another sleepless night chained to this fucking pole with icy feet and a numb ass.

I'd only dropped by the tower in the first place to appease my mom, deciding to swing by for a brief visit when she'd summoned me during my evening workout. I grabbed a shower in my room before I was supposed to meet her in her home office, intent on also packing a bag with the few things I had left in my room that meant anything to me in case it was the last time I returned there.

I'd barely pulled my pants on when I was ambushed, and I fucked up by not putting my Rolex back on my wrist first thing. It, along with the internal panic button the three of us all had hidden in our watches, sat uselessly on my nightstand, right next to my fucking gun, so I had to improvise.

They won, and I lost, but five Ferrero Enforcers had to die before they managed to knock me out and drag me all the way out here.

And while my Princess will have missed me at bedtime, it was a stroke of luck that Frankie would have missed me even earlier—we'd been set to have a drink together in a basement dive bar near the Academy about an hour after I was nabbed.

If anyone could possibly be more hacked off about me disappearing without a word than my brothers or my girlfriend, it would be Frankie.

One of them would hunt us down eventually, and I could only hope it would be before my mom ordered me moved to another location or Ramon slipped and inflicted more lasting damage than usual.

Just as I was steeling myself for another cold, uncomfortable night, the heavy door slid open, and the telltale click-clack of high heels announced the inevitable.

My mom had arrived.

Without a word, she stalked through the team guarding me, her long wool coat swaying as she moved. She pushed her oversized sunglasses to the top of her head, revealing her cold, dark gaze as she took in my battered form sprawled on the floor and chained to a pole. She frowned, as if seeing the violence she wrought up close

and personal was surprising to her. Then she pulled her two-thousand-dollar scarf tighter around her neck, like she was bracing against the cold that she no doubt found reflected back at her in my stare.

“Oh, Zachary.”

She knelt in front of me, stretching her tight skirt to its limit, and she reached up to caress the side of my face. Fortunately, I still had use of both of my eyes, but I had a gash in the side of my head, and the blood that had oozed from it was now dried on the side of my face and my neck.

“Mom,” I said, smiling like my usual charming self. “Come to join the party? We haven’t done this in a while—I was starting to think you were getting soft.”

Her concerned frown morphed into the anger I was certain she really felt. “I see you’re not taking this seriously. I shouldn’t be surprised—these little *corrections* never did seem to make a permanent impact on you.”

“Wouldn’t be in the best interest of Ferrero to permanently scar this pretty face, Mom,” I quipped, still forcing a smile through the throbbing pain in my ribs.

She pulled her hand from my cheek and stood up to peer down at me with her nose in the air. “Do you know why you’re here, Zachary?”

I let my shitty smile fall away, a blank look then settling over my face. “Because Jolie Knight got one over on you, and you’re taking it out on me.”

She began to pace in front of me, the loud clicking of her heels against the cold cement floor grating on my ears. “No, baby. You’re here because I suspect you’ve actually *fallen* for that little tramp. And that calls your loyalty to our Family into serious question, because by the end of this little fight she’s started, she will be dead, and Ferrero will have everything she stole from us and then some.” She paused to look down at me. “And it would just *gut* me, Zachary, if you were standing in my way.”

“It *would* be pretty inconvenient for you to have to find a new Heir.”

She rolled her eyes at me before resuming her pacing. “I gave you and your little friends access to the most coveted, beautiful women in the City who were at your beck and call any time of the day or night, and still you let yourself be pulled away from your own Family by that girl. Why? Because you have some fond childhood memories?”

I glared at her. “Because she belongs with us. Whatever bullshit reason you and the others concocted for murdering the Knights didn’t change that.”

“She’s trying to destroy us, Zachary,” she snapped. “What we did that night, we did for the Families. I did it for Ferrero. For *you*.”

I barked out a laugh. “Sure, Mom. Just like you have your bodyguard beat on me for *me*.”

She sighed, that look of faux concern back on her plastic face. “I’d always assumed you had more of me in you, Zachary, despite the fact that you look just like your poor father. But maybe I was wrong. He always was just a beautiful idiot.”

I scowled, feeling protective of my dad even though I had only vague memories of him. He’d died in his sleep of a brain aneurysm when I was five, but I did remember him as a happier, blonder version of me. In hindsight, I had no idea what the fuck he saw in my mom besides what was in her bank account.

“So,” Mom continued, “I think I’ll leave you here with Ramon and his team a little longer, baby. I need you to really think about what’s important to this Family.”

I didn’t need to look across the room to know that Ramon would be giving me his version of an evil smile, which was just slightly less of a grimace than he normally wore.

“And,” she went on, “once Ramon is satisfied with your… course of treatment, you’ll be coming home with me. I’m certain the Academy will allow you to finish the semester via correspondence, and that will allow me to keep a *close* eye on you until I’m confident you’ve chosen the right path.” She knelt in front of me one last time, her dark eyes boring into mine with the vicious ferocity she normally directed at everyone but me. “And that will also give us time to put that obnoxious little Knight skank in an unmarked grave next to her

parents. I suspect that once she's removed from the board, you'll remember who you are, Zachary."

I tried to smother the shiver that wracked my body. I knew Jojo was ready for her war with the Families to turn violent, but it didn't stop the brutal wave of panic and despair at the thought of losing her again.

Through that terror, I forced one last smile for my mother. "Game on, Mom. I can't wait until you realize just how badly you've fucked up."

She shook her head, standing once again and turning on her heel. She stalked back across the room, motioning to Ramon as she approached the door.

"Fix this," she barked, and then she was gone with a loud slam of the door behind her.

Ramon watched her go, like the sick, devoted puppy he was, before he returned his dead eyes to me.

He advanced, and I braced myself for a long night.

CHAPTER TWO

NOAH



I stood on the dock of the Boathouse, a rowing club in Olde Town and apparently the place where our Jojo had been fished from the Obsidian River on the worst night of our lives. Bennett and I looked on as a horde of men and women dressed in black and armed to the hilt swarmed the dock, each of them focused on their assigned task of preparing our boats to cross the river and land on the shores of Industrial City.

"Seriously, Martinez?" Bennett snapped at a familiar man who skirted by us, carrying what appeared to be a flamethrower. "Was being my personal guard so terrible?"

Martinez grinned at Bennett. "It wasn't, actually, but you know my time with Spencer was also spent doing other things I found a lot less… palatable. The mission of the Shadows is more in line with my values." He winked at us both as he sauntered away, tossing the flamethrower into one of the boats.

"Unbelievable," Bennett muttered. "I'd thought he *died*."

"Yeah," I said lamely. I remembered how bummed fourteen-year-old Bennett had been when his favorite bodyguard disappeared, and twenty-year-old Bennett was not impressed to find him here, very much alive and apparently part of a secret resistance organization that had been lurking in the City all these years, lying in wait for the right time to move against the Families. "Kara's over there," I added,

motioning toward the Boathouse's doorway. "Remember she was my mom's guard before Mom bailed on us?"

Bennett just grunted as he eyed the still-very-buff woman in her forties where she was engaged in a serious conversation with Dom, our de facto leader for this little raid to extract the wayward Ferrero Heir.

Our heads snapped to the other side of the dock as Jolie emerged from around the side of the building. She still wore the emotionless mask that had descended over her face the second Frankie had reported Zach's disappearance. She'd shut down immediately, becoming singularly focused on saving Zach while shoving aside all the soul-shattering shit that she'd just gone through at the hands of her uncle.

She'd pulled the trigger on something called "Phase Three," and Bennett and I were now getting a crash course on the true extent of the power behind our girl.

"I don't know if I'm more worried about Zach or Jojo," I said, adjusting my weapons belt. "I know Andrea won't have Zach hurt in any life-threatening way, but that doesn't mean he's not suffering. And Jojo is… not taking this well."

"Recall she made an entire Tier One company disappear and had the CEO put in prison because I came to school with a shiner," Bennett said as his consuming gaze followed her every move. I hadn't thought the way he looked at her could get more obsessive, but now that they'd had sex and apparently also swapped *the L-word* —because Bennett didn't do anything half-assed, the bastard—his intensity when it came to Jolie was at an entirely new level. "I'm surprised Ferrero Tower is still standing, honestly."

A gruff voice sounded behind us. "You boys all caught up yet?"

The owner of the Boathouse, an older guy named Bruce who was sporting a gray ponytail, white stubble, and track pants from the eighties, stepped up beside us. He glanced in Jojo's direction with a knowing grimace before turning his attention back to us. "She'll snap out of it eventually. I was worried, but when she looks at you two, she does soften up a bit. She's still in there."

"She's been through a lot in the past twenty-four hours," I replied. "It's understandable."

“She’s a survivor,” he agreed. “I knew it the moment I pulled her from the water all those years ago.”

Bennett and I both jerked our heads in his direction. “You’re the one that found her?” Bennett asked.

“Who else? I own the place.”

“And you handed her over to this… Shadows organization, trusting they’d do right by her?” I asked. I shuddered to think of all the ways that night could have gone even *more* wrong.

He grunted in irritation. “I took her to Dominic, trusting *he* would do right by her. Her later involvement with the Shadows was her decision.”

I watched as Jolie and Max stood huddled together on one of the boats, both of them muttering into the speaker of Jolie’s phone, probably talking to Zepp. I knew I’d get my update from Silver, as she was now squarely in Zepp’s business and enjoying poking at him on a regular basis.

Bennett looked at Bruce again. “So, the Shadows are a secret army of people who have a problem with the Families? People who’ve defected or otherwise been harmed by us?” He paused, swallowing hard. “*Them*. Harmed by them.”

“Yes,” Bruce replied. “It’s a network of those in the City actively opposed to the rule of the Four Families. Every member has their own personal reasons for joining. There are certainly many who have a history of working within the Families.”

Bennett pondered this for two seconds before stating what we were both thinking. “There are Shadows undercover within the Families today.”

Bruce cracked an amused smile. “Yep.”

“Damn,” I said. Our parents had *no* fucking clue this existed right under their noses.

Bruce went on. “Some of us have had loved ones get on the wrong side of the Families. Many have had an injustice done to them personally. We have people from all walks of life with all kinds of skills, from the hackers and the muscle you see here, right down to the kitchen worker at the Euphoria Club who left the door open for your girl one night last fall.”

We both tensed at the reminder of what *Joanna Miller* had been up to last semester—the *danger* she'd put herself in—before I dared to ask Bruce the obvious question. "What pushed you to join?"

He was quiet for a beat. "My wife passed away ten years ago of a cancer that would have been treatable had she been allowed into the program at City Center Hospital. But we didn't have the right last name or the funds."

A Hargraves hospital. Shame curdled in my gut, and I vowed to fix it.

"And now that you—*we* have Jolie's fortune," Bennett said, swiftly changing the subject, "the Shadows have decided to come out into the open?"

"Yes, though we became a pretty well-funded organization about fifteen years ago when we had some… people of means join up," Bruce replied. "But things have moved quickly over the past few years. What happened to Jolie was a rallying cry—not even the innocent children of the Families were safe in this City, for Christ's sake."

"And her mission to avenge her parents and destroy the Families aligns with the reason for the Shadows' existence," I finished.

"Indeed." He motioned to the flurry of activity on the dock. "And here we are, throwing some of our best men and women into a battle with Ferrero to rescue the Ferrero Heir because Jojo loves him."

Bennett bristled. "And because he's a valuable asset to the organization."

"And that, sure," he replied, chuckling.

All three of us watched as Jolie abandoned her position in her boat and made her way toward us. She was dressed in the same black tactical gear we were all wearing, and I took a moment to appreciate how sexy my girl looked in cargo pants.

She came to a stop next to us and gave Bruce a squinty-eyed stare. "Is that a crossbow?"

Bruce nodded, motioning to the weapon he had strapped to his back. "Did you think I only knew how to bark orders at middle schoolers learning to row?"

She almost cracked a smile at that. "Pretty much, yeah."

“Angel,” Bennett said, using his new pet name for her that made even *my* insides gooey. “Are you doing okay?”

“I’m fine, Bennett,” she said, and her hard expression relaxed just enough when she looked at him to appease us both. “We’re going to get Zach back, and we’re going to make anyone who’s laid a hand on him pay with their life.”

I reached for her, and she let me pull her into my side. I felt her sag against me, releasing a little bit of the tension she was carrying, and I pressed a kiss to her temple. Bennett moved in front of us, and he was bold enough to grasp her chin with his big hand, forcing her to look him in the eyes.

“We will get him back,” he agreed before he took her mouth in a demanding kiss. He was the only one around here not treating her like she was a bomb about to go off. After a few seconds, he pulled back to stare her down again. “Do not do anything reckless tonight, or I’ll have Noah put you over his knee.”

She shivered, and I grinned. “Look at Spencer being a team player already,” I whispered into her ear.

She let out a breathy sigh, then she snapped out of it and shook us off. “Focus, both of you. Have you heard anything else from Frankie?”

“No,” I replied. “He’s still got eyes on the team they have blocking the bridge, but he hasn’t texted again since he reported Andrea crossing back into the City.”

“That bitch is dead,” she spat.

Maybe, but not tonight, it seemed. “Zach’s used to this, sweetheart. He’s tough and won’t let her get to him.”

“I don’t give a fuck. No one touches him and gets to live.”

Bennett and I exchanged a loaded look. Jolie in overprotective-beast-mode about one of us was such a turn on, but we had to lock it up until Zach was safe and we’d all had a nap.

The minute Frankie had informed us that Zach had gone missing, we’d thrown ourselves completely into finding him. Jolie, Bennett, and I had taken fifteen minutes to retrieve Jolie’s belongings from the Knight penthouse—*her* penthouse now, truly and completely—showered, changed clothes, then spent the night camped twenty

floors below in Silver's command center, coordinating with Zepp and the Shadows to scour the City for Zach's whereabouts.

Frankie had come through by ten o'clock this morning, having located the one Ferrero Enforcer who was in on the plans for Zach's kidnapping and not also either hidden at the location with Zach or dead on his bedroom floor in Ferrero Tower. Frankie had made quick work of that unfortunate soul, and an hour later, Silver and Zepp had identified a piece of property owned by a Ferrero shell in Industrial City.

The blockade of the bridge happened soon after, so we knew we'd found our target. And since there was a small army on the one car route into Industrial City, we would be going by sea.

Bennett's phone buzzed, and he ignored yet another call from his father. I'd ignored three from my own father since last night, both of them likely growing very annoyed that we'd disappeared from the Academy and were nowhere to be found in the City.

Fuck them. I was already done with my dad and the decaying corpse that was Hargraves, but after Bennett told me what he'd learned listening to Anders wax poetic about selling his own flesh and blood to the Families for power and money, and I'd given him the final piece of the puzzle—the world-changing contents of Jolie's dad's flash drive—we both knew it was really and truly over for us.

Fuck our parents. Fuck the Four Families. They'd pay for what they did to our girl and then lied to our faces about for seven goddamned years. If she wanted to slit their throats, I'd help her do it and then pop the champagne afterward.

A whistle sounded. "Yo, Nathan! Spencer! Load up—we're moving out."

I scowled at Max while Bennett had the audacity to snicker.

"Don't fucking encourage him," I griped as we followed Jolie and Bruce to our assigned boat.

Jolie smirked at me over her shoulder—a welcome sight. "Don't worry, Noah. He'll run out of *N* names eventually, then he'll have to get a new bit. I doubt he'll ever stop hitting on Bennett."

It was Bennett's turn to scowl as we climbed into the speedboat. Max barked out a laugh. "Fuck no. And since everyone's so good at sharing around here, Jojo will share Big Man with me, won't you?"

“In your dreams, Max,” she replied, but that smile was threatening to break through her hard mask.

Max winked at us, and I decided I hated him slightly less.

“Everyone ready?” Dom called out. He and Kara had boarded one of the other four boats carrying our group of two dozen. “You all have your marching orders. In and out. Shoot to kill. Let’s bring Zach home.”

He cast a fond look over at Jolie, who returned it with a curt nod. She’d blanked again.

We fired up the boats, Bruce at the helm of ours, and we were off to save Zach before we lost him forever to the dark side of Ferrero.

CHAPTER THREE

JOLIE



As Bruce maneuvered our boat along the western shore of Industrial City, I pulled my balaclava over my face and tightened the straps of my helmet. The clock was ticking, and I'd have Zach in my arms again within the hour if everything went according to plan.

Zepp's voice sounded in our earpieces. "Our drone picked up twelve heat signatures at the target. Ten scattered around the front of the warehouse with at least six guarding the main door. There's one guard on the small back door, and our boy is likely being held back wall, center."

Fresh rage thrummed through my veins.

"Thanks, Zepp," Dom's voice responded. "Shadow Team, get ready to disembark. Boat drivers, prepare to head south after we unload."

There was no dock on the west bank of Industrial City, and Andrea had made sure the docks to the north under the bridge into the City were blocked by a large container ship idling on the water. So, we were doing a drive-by to unload before we trekked the half mile inland to our target.

Bennett appeared next to me. "Ready, Angel?" He pulled his own face covering up over his mouth and nose, his mossy green eyes scanning the shore with a focused intensity that settled something in

my bones. “They’re not prepared for this. The Families have no fucking idea who stands against them.”

“Damn right,” Noah said from my other side, slinging his sniper rifle onto his back.

“I’m ready,” I replied. “I have a lot of anger to burn off right now.”

“Strap in, lovebirds,” Max called to us as he straddled the side of the boat. “It’s go time.”

And with that, we were off. The shoreline, shrouded in darkness under the cloudy night sky, blended right into the black waters of the river. As our boats skirted along the crumbling retaining wall, we hopped over the side one by one, taking care to land lightly in our heavy boots on the dusty gravel.

Dom signaled to me, and he peeled away with the larger group, headed to attack the warehouse from the front in the most distracting way possible.

“Be safe, sweetheart,” Noah whispered to me, squeezing my hand before he melted into Dom’s group.

As Team Shock and Awe disappeared through the narrow pathway leading into the first cluster of shipping containers near the shore, my little team snaked southeast, intent on attacking the inadequately guarded back of the building.

“Bennett, I’m leading,” I griped as he strode ahead of me, his big body moving through the shadows like a slippery ghost.

“Nah, I like this better,” Max said from behind me. “We can stare at that fantastic ass.”

“Max, your eyes better be on your *surroundings*,” I hissed over my shoulder.

Bennett remained silent, refusing to give up the lead, and the three of us wound our way through the rusty warehouses and crooked, flickering streetlamps until we’d worked our way inland and the shoreline disappeared from view.

Kara’s hushed voice came through our earpieces. “Team Shock and Awe is in position.”

“Team White Knight is fifty yards south of target, ready to approach,” Bennett replied.

“*Bennett*,” I snapped. “Stop doing my job.”

“Shh, Angel,” he murmured. “We’re about to get Zach back.”

I blew out a breath. Fuck yes, we were.

Max snickered from behind me. “That was too easy, Jojo.”

“Shut up, Max.”

We moved another twenty yards forward, and Zach’s prison came into view. The warehouse was a large cube of faded brown brick, its few narrow windows dark and covered by steel bars. In the dim yellow light of the sidewalk lamp, we could just make out the drab green door that allowed entry to the back, our only obstacle a small, rusty padlock hanging above the brass doorknob.

Suddenly, an explosion sounded from the front. The loud clatter of someone ripping open the large rolling steel door of the main entrance followed, and then—

Chaos.

Shouting, rapid gun shots, the bright orange flare that lit up the sky—Martinez and his flamethrower at work—and that was our signal.

We rushed the back door, and Max made quick work of the shitty padlock with one precise bullet. Bennett lifted his heavy-booted foot and kicked the door in, and within two seconds, the lone, confused guard was down, the victim of my semi-automatic pistol and my rage.

“Zach!” I shouted as I hurdled the Enforcer’s body and ran for the center of the back wall.

He was there, splayed out on the cold floor, his back against a steel pole and his arms behind him, wrapped in fucking *chains*.

Bennett and Max covered me, firing shots toward the front of the warehouse where the few Enforcers who hadn’t run outside into the commotion were engaged in a fight with Kara’s team.

“Princess!” Zach’s tired face lit up like Christmas morning as I sprinted his way. “You missed me.”

“Shut up, you ridiculous, sexy asshole,” I breathed as I fell to my knees in front of him. “Of course I missed you. Don’t do this shit to me again.” I ran my gloved hands all over his body, feeling for injuries. There was blood all over his fucking clothes and his face, and everyone in this goddamn warehouse was going to *die*.

“I’m okay, baby girl, I promise,” he said. “Just see if you can get me out of these chains, yeah?”

Bennett had positioned himself in front of us, pistol held aloft, and he was firing the occasional shot into the fray in the front.

“Here!” Max yelled, pulling something from the pocket of one of the fallen Enforcers. He launched it at Bennett, who snatched it out of the air.

“Key,” he said, turning to toss it my way.

“Fuck yes,” I hissed as I caught it, then I scrambled around the back of the pole and jammed the key into the lock on the chains. It clicked, and the chains fell away from Zach’s arms and pooled on the floor in front of me.

Zach was on his feet in an instant, looking no worse for wear as he bolted for the front of the warehouse.

“Zach!” I shouted, suddenly terrified. He wasn’t wearing Kevlar like the rest of us—what the fuck was he thinking?

Bennett tossed him a gun, which Zach caught in one hand without so much as a glance at it as he streaked past Bennett, and I watched in equal parts awe and horror as he launched himself over the back of the metal table that had been flipped on its side—where a lone Enforcer had taken cover while continuing to fire shots at Kara and her team.

Just as one of those shots hit Kara in her shoulder, Zach tackled the Enforcer to the ground behind the table.

“Shit,” Bennett swore as the sounds of struggle ensued. He pulled me to my feet, and we both dashed to the front of the huge room. The occasional popping of gunshots continued outside, though the shouting and general sounds of mayhem had abated.

Zach jumped up from behind the table, a second gun in hand and new bloody gash on his forehead. He tucked his extra pistol into his sweatpants—a model of gun safety—and aimed the other at his captive as he proceeded to drag him out from behind the table by his leg while wearing a feral smile.

Ramon.

“Inside is clear,” Kara announced into our earpieces as she nursed her wounded shoulder, aided by a concerned Julie—her second-in-command and her wife.

“What did I say, Ramon?” Zach said as he dropped him in the middle of the floor, his gun still pointed at Ramon’s head. “I told you

that before this was over, I was going to break every bone in your body."

"You don't have the balls, boy," Ramon bit out through clenched teeth. He was clearly in pain, so Zach must have already done a number on him.

"You don't think so?" Zach asked lightly. He tossed a look over at Bennett and me. "Make sure he doesn't go anywhere."

We both drew our weapons and aimed them at Ramon while Zach padded on his bare feet to the corner of the warehouse. He proceeded to dig in a black duffle bag he found there.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, pulling a set of brass knuckles from the bag. "Did you think I didn't remember the times in the past when you'd gotten these babies out for my punishments, Ramon? You warned me we were about to take a trip down memory lane before you were so rudely interrupted by my Princess and her…." He cast a curious look around the warehouse at the few members of our Shadow team that weren't dealing with whatever was going on outside. "Personal commandos."

I glared at Ramon over the barrel of my gun. "You've tortured Zach before?"

Bennett gave my hand a comforting squeeze. "Andrea started punishing Zach this way right after they took you from us."

I squeezed the trigger, burying a bullet right in Ramon's kneecap. He screamed in pain, so I went ahead and shot the other knee out, too, because I liked the symmetry of it all.

"Oh fuck, baby girl," Zach cooed at me as he returned to my side to lord over Ramon as he convulsed on the floor. "That was hot, but you gotta leave some for me, okay?" He pulled me in for a lingering kiss to my forehead, and then he got to work.

After sliding the brass knuckles onto his right hand, Zach proceeded to brutally and painstakingly break as many bones in Ramon's body as possible while the rest of us looked on with both respect and grim satisfaction. After Zach finally ended it all with a clean shot to the head, I pulled him into my arms. He sagged against me, still breathing hard, and I vowed to never let him go again.

"I'm fine, Princess," he said, wrapping an arm around me and sandwiching me between his big body and Bennett's. "Just need a

decent night's sleep, and I'll be good as new."

We'd just see about that, but before I could argue with Zach about the need for our doctor to go over him with a fine-tooth comb, the rest of our team finally began to stream through the open bay door.

"Outside is clear," Dom announced in our ears about ten seconds before he walked through the door. "We had a few of the runners get away, but they won't be showing their faces in the City again after that kind of cowardly shit."

Noah walked next to him, and he pulled his face covering down to reveal a wide smile. Dom, on the other hand, looked… pouty?

"What crawled up your ass?" I asked Dom as he came to a stop near us and cast a detached, clinical stare over what was left of Ramon.

He huffed. "I challenged Hargraves to a little competition, and I lost."

Noah pulled Zach into a bro hug before sliding in front of me to do his obligatory check over my whole body for injuries. I swatted him away, muttering about how I was a big girl and completely unharmed, *obviously*, and he just chuckled at me before he turned to Dom. "It was pretty even, Dom. The team took a few of your easy kills with that grenade. My side of the roof just had more bodies to choose from."

"Still," he griped, and I stifled a smile. My dad had gotten into a sniper competition with my boyfriend, and if that wasn't a good summation of the state of my life right now, I didn't know what was.

It was Bennett's turn to step in front of me where I stood, still clinging to Zach, and he pulled his balaclava down before tugging mine off as well. He wrapped his big hand gently around the back of my neck as he searched my face, those powerful green eyes threatening to pull me into a trance. "You back with us now, Angel?"

I sighed. "Yes. Despite our… current surroundings, I feel more at peace than I ever have now that I have all three of you with me again."

"Good," he rumbled before stealing a raw, possessive kiss from me. I moaned into his mouth, and I felt Zach suck in a startled breath next to me.

When Bennett pulled away, Zach was grinning from ear to ear. He motioned between the two of us. “Sooo, when did *this* happen?”

I shrugged. “After Bennett beat Anders to death with his bare hands for drugging and kidnapping me and also for selling my dad’s priceless research to the Families who murdered my parents for it.”

Zach was silent for a beat, his eyes bouncing between us, before he said, “I’ve missed some things.”

“You’ve missed some things,” Noah agreed.

I snuggled into Zach’s side as I gave Bennett a dreamy smile. “We fucked and he also *L-worded* me.”

Bennett returned my smile with a smug grin of his own while Zach pouted next to me. “Seriously, man? You’re the world’s most stubborn fucking asshole about her all this time, and suddenly you’re jumping ahead of the rest of us with the *L-word*? Unreal. Fuck you.”

“That’s what I said,” Noah told him, but they were both grinning—clearly as happy as I was that the four of us were a solid unit once again.

Zach’s dark gaze snagged on something across the room. “Wait, is that… Martinez?” His narrow-eyed stare tracked Martinez’s tall, muscular form as he breezed through the bay doors, tossed a salute our way, then moseyed over to check in with Kara.

“Another thing you missed,” Bennett grumbled, sounding bitter. I’d known that Martinez had worked deep within the high levels of Spencer years ago, but I hadn’t known until earlier tonight that he’d also been Bennett’s bodyguard for a stint. “Our girlfriend is the leader of a powerful underground network of Family defectors. Keep up.”

“I’m not sure I’d say I’m *the* leader—” I began, but then another of our team ambled by.

“Hey, boss lady,” Rocky said to me before he looked at Zach. “Good to see you in one piece, Ferrero.”

Zach gaped at him. “*Et tu*, Rocky?”

Rocky, who had been a head bouncer at the Club in his previous life, just shot Zach a saucy wink before joining the huddle with the rest of the team.

Zach shook his head. “He was one of the best guys we had at the Club before he up and disappeared two years ago. What an

asshole."

I grinned sheepishly at all three of my boyfriends. "We have collected some interesting people in the Shadows. But now that includes you guys, right?"

"Of course it does, sweetheart," Noah replied.

"In the what now?" Zach asked, confused.

Before I could launch into my explanation of who the fuck all these people were, the loud screeching of tires sounded outside the bay door.

Every single one of us drew our weapons as one of the armored SUVs that had been blocking the bridge from the City slid to a grinding halt right in front of the warehouse entrance. The driver's door opened, and Frankie hopped out.

"Aw, damn, did I miss all the fun?" he asked, unbothered that he had twenty guns pointed at him. He slammed the door, and a black-clad body that had apparently taken a ride on the hood of the vehicle slid to the ground with an unimpressive thud. He stuck out his lower lip and said with a dramatic whine, "You guys said I could play with the flamethrower."

He strolled inside, and even the most seasoned members of our team watched him warily. Frankie's ratty baby-pink tank top was soaked with blood, the spatter crawling up his neck and onto his face. He'd slung his AK-47 haphazardly across his back, and I didn't even want to know what other sharp objects he had strapped to his body.

The only person not gaping at him was Max, whose hungry gaze tracked Frankie's every movement as Frankie approached where I stood with my boys.

"Goddamn it," I swore under my breath. "I think Max fucked Frankie. Or if he hasn't, he definitely wants to."

Zach snorted. "In his dreams. Frankie doesn't fuck outside the Club, Princess."

I wasn't so sure about that, given that I'd just watched Frankie's caramel eyes slide toward Max and then bounce away like he didn't want to get caught looking.

Ugh, Max.

“Nephew!” Frankie crowed as he neared us. “Glad to see you looking well and in the arms of your beloved.” He stopped to examine Ramon. “Ah, I see someone got what was coming to him. Want me to have that delivered to my dear sister’s doorstep?”

“Definitely,” Zach replied. “Pin a note to his chest that says she should consider this my resignation from Ferrero.”

“Done,” Frankie said, grinning. “I should probably tender my resignation as well. I think I’ve burned all the bridges—literally and figuratively.” He waggled his pierced eyebrows, then he looked at me. “Got a place for me in the Shadows, Little Knight?”

The hum of shocked whispers and muttering sounded around us. The infamous Frankie Fingers wanted to join the Shadows?

And I wasn’t even going to ask how he’d known what the Shadows were in the first place.

“Um, fuck yes, we do,” I replied. “And at Knight, if you want it.”

He beamed at me before performing a little bow. “I am at your service, my lady.”

“Alright, team,” Dom called out, waking everyone from their slack-jawed stupor at watching Frankie Fingers swear fealty to the Knight Heir. “Clear out. Martinez is going to torch the place. We meet the boats in ten.”

“Fuck, I need a nap,” Zach moaned. “And… some shoes.”

We’d get him both of those things, and I’d make sure he didn’t leave my side for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

JOLIE



I woke the next morning in my bunk at home, my entire body pressed against Zach as if I'd tried to crawl inside his skin while we slept. I'd buried my face in the soft sleep shirt he'd borrowed from Max, and he smelled like my shampoo, awakening that possessive animal in me as I breathed him in.

She was content and very smug this morning.

Muffled voices outside the bedroom door told me that the others were awake and puttering around our little kitchen/living room. Noah had slept on the couch and Bennett on an air mattress next to him, the latter having not-so-politely declined Max's offer to snuggle in his bunk below mine.

"Morning, baby girl," Zach rasped, arching against me with a languid stretch. "Sleep okay?"

"Yes," I muttered into his chest. "After our doctor assured me you would live."

Zach had staples in his head, a broken rib, and a few other swollen body parts, and he'd promised me it was nothing he hadn't dealt with on a regular basis, given how much time he spent using his fists in the cage.

"Don't worry about me, please, Jojo," he whispered into my hair. "All things considered, I think you've had a much worse past forty-eight hours than I have."

Zach had received the full debrief as we all ate Chinese takeout around our little kitchen table late last night, so he was now up to speed on my traitorous uncle, my dad's research, and the lurking, silent monster that was the Shadows.

"I don't know," I mused, pulling my face from his T-shirt and looking into those gorgeous dark eyes. "Anders died a brutal, painful death for what he did. I have the answers I've been seeking for seven and a half years. I have all three of you back with me. Max, Dom, and Laura are safe and healthy. And the notorious Frankie Fingers is now a Shadow and full-fledged member of Knight." I raised my brows, giving him a little grin. "Things are actually looking pretty great for me."

He returned my smile, dipping in for a kiss that quickly turned filthy. I moaned against his lips, and I felt him harden against my stomach. "Let me have you, baby girl," he whispered against my lips, his deep rasp turning urgent. "I need you."

"Zach," I moaned. "My *family* is outside the door."

"I can be quiet," he replied with a sexy grin. "Can you?"

I fell into that hungry stare, and I could only nod. He made quick work of my sleep shorts, inching them down my thighs just enough for me to pull one leg out, and I tossed that leg over his trim hips as he pulled his dick from his pajama pants and slid home.

I whimpered as he buried his groan in my neck, and he began to move inside me, slow and steady, while he dipped his hand between us, a rough finger finding my clit. He brought me quickly to a toe-curling climax, and he smothered my pained whine with a hungry kiss. He came with me, and afterward we held each other again for a few quiet, blissful minutes.

"You know I'm in love with you, Princess?" he murmured in my ear.

I sucked in a breath. "Yeah?"

"Of course I am." He righted my shorts and ran his fingers through my messy hair before pulling away just enough to stare into my eyes. "First, I loved you the way a twelve-year-old loves his best friend. Then I loved you as I mourned you, our lost angel. And now? I've never met such an incredible, sexy, *powerful* woman, and the

fact that this woman is *my* Jojo? I was a goner from day one, baby girl. I'm so fucking in love with you, it's not even funny."

A tear leaked from my eye, because apparently Bennett had broken the dam, and I was a crier now. "I love you too," I whispered. "Always have, always will."

"That's good, Princess," he replied with a blinding smile. "Because you're never getting rid of me."

Just as he rolled me onto my back and climbed on top of me, someone pounded on the bedroom door.

"Keep it in your pants, Ferrero!" Max barked through the closed door. "Breakfast is almost ready, and then we all have shit to do."

"Ugh," Zach groaned, rolling off me. "Sounds like he needs me to kick his ass again."

I smacked a quick kiss against his lips, then I shimmied down the little ladder attached to the bunks. When I hit the floor, I peered up at where Zach flopped over the edge of the bed, watching me, and I gave him my sternest glare. "I'm going to need you to give yourself at least two weeks before you even think about getting back in that cage, or I'll beat your ass myself."

He just shot me a sexy smirk, his eyes heating like he'd really enjoy that. I returned it with an exasperated look and went hunting for some clothes.



I emerged from the bathroom sometime later, dressed in leggings and an oversized sweatshirt, mercifully free of the mess Zach left between my thighs. When I arrived in the living room, I found all three of my boyfriends—the Heirs of the Four Families of Saint Gabriel City—looking contrite as they sat in a neat row on the couch. Dom loomed over them with his arms crossed.

Max was seated on a stool at the kitchen bar, shoveling cereal in his mouth with an eager smile as he looked on. Laura busied herself in the kitchen, very obviously pretending to ignore the situation in the living room.

“—and you won’t be fighting over her like dogs with a bone, do you understand me?” Dom was saying.

“Yes, sir,” Bennett replied.

“Of course not,” Noah added.

“She’d cut our balls off,” Zach finished.

“Dom,” I said, my tone saccharin sweet and very threatening. “What’s this about?”

“Hey, honey,” he replied, smiling warmly and impervious to the daggers I glared at him. He motioned me over, and I padded across the hardwood floor and onto the threadbare carpet in our tiny living room, coming to a stop next to him. “I was just having a little chat with your boys, here. I am completely convinced of their feelings for you as well as their loyalty, but I just wanted to make sure everyone was confident they could handle the dynamics of a polyamorous relationship.”

“Oh my God, Dom,” I groaned, feeling my face heat.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Noah said with a soft smile. “We get that our relationship isn’t the norm and has come together under… interesting circumstances. Dom’s just asking questions because he loves you.”

Zach coughed into his fist. “Kiss ass.”

I eyed Bennett with raised brows. He was the newest member of this… situation, after all, and I wasn’t exactly sure how confident he was in the whole thing. That thought flew out of my head, however, as I took in his sleep-rumpled brown hair, his tight gray sweatpants, and his thin white sleep shirt that failed to hide the outline of the gorgeous angel wings tattooed across his broad chest.

He caught me staring at him like a lusty bitch, and a cocky little smirk played across his handsome face before he wiped it away and said, “We had eleven years of being as close as friends could be, and even death couldn’t break that bond. We’ll figure it out together, Angel.”

Laura let out a little squeal from the kitchen. “He calls her ‘Angel’? Oh my God, I’m going to cry.”

“Keep it together, Mom,” Max muttered around a mouthful of cereal.

Dom nodded, seemingly satisfied, and he looped an arm around my shoulder to give me an affectionate squeeze. “You deserve so much love, honey. I’m glad you have them back again.”

I sniffed. Goddamn it, the waterworks *had* to stop. “Thanks, Dom. So am I.”

He meandered away, heading for the kitchen, and I gave in to my baser instincts and crawled right into Bennett’s lap.

“Morning, Angel,” he rumbled, wrapping his arms around me and pressing a lingering kiss behind my ear that sent tingles down to my toes.

“Hi, Bennett.” I sighed, snuggling into him as I reached out for Noah, who reclined next to him on the middle couch cushion, looking similarly sleep-disheveled and delicious.

Noah threaded his long fingers through mine. “Hey, sweetheart. How are you feeling?”

“I’m good,” I replied. “I’ll be ready to rejoin the real world soon, I think.”

“Good, because Bennett was only able to buy us one more day excused from class before the dean started making noise about getting our parents involved. So, we have a lot to do today if we’re going back to school tomorrow.”

Zach returned from the kitchen with two hot mugs of coffee and settled himself on the sofa table, facing us. He handed me one of the mugs like the king he was, and the sexual moan that escaped me after that first delightful sip had all three of them squirming.

“Easy there, Princess,” Zach purred. “I don’t like thinking that your coffee got you hotter than I did earlier.”

Noah snorted. “I knew that was your ‘I just got laid’ face, Ferrero. I can’t believe you sat here and looked Dom in the eye after that.”

“Dom and Laura know I’m a grown woman with healthy sexual needs,” I declared from my perch in Bennett’s lap. “They’re cool—they have to be, since Max is basically a walking hard-on.”

“I heard that!” Max shouted from the kitchen.

“You were meant to!” I yelled back.

“We’re too young to be grandparents!” Laura announced to the room, because apparently things weren’t already awkward enough.

“Ugh,” I groaned, and my boys all chuckled at my flushed cheeks. “Let’s eat so we can get to work. I want to get things rolling before Ramon is even cold on Andrea’s doorstep.”



By late afternoon, we’d made a lot of progress.

“So, the patents have been filed, and we’re going to be able to run everything out of the Foundation?” I asked Zepp through the speakers of my laptop currently propped on my lap where I was seated on the floor of the living room. I had my back against the couch, and Noah was sprawled out on the cushions above me, one hand fiddling with his phone while he ran the other lazily through my hair. He’d just returned from Laura’s office down in the bookstore, which he’d commandeered for several hours to conduct his own business.

“Yes, we will be funding your charitable work with the profits from the greatest tech breakthrough of the decade, since apparently you’ve decided you do not want to be the richest person on the planet,” Zepp grumbled.

“I’m plenty rich.”

“That’s the spirit,” Noah chimed in.

Zepp took an audible sip of his energy drink. “Fine, I get it. I won’t fight you about it, since you gave me a massive raise, allowing me to keep myself in the finery to which I have become accustomed.”

“How long ago was it that you washed the hoodie I know you’re wearing?” I asked as I scrolled through the various documents Zepp had posted to our secure server.

We heard him sniff. “If I had to guess… at least a month.”

Noah leaned over my shoulder, giving my ear a little nibble before he said into my speakers, “Silver told me she sent you a set of brand-new Knight Technologies polo shirts so you’d have some clean laundry.”

Zepp huffed, turning sulky. “That was unnecessary, and I’m still pissed she found my address.”

Entertaining as the ongoing war between Zepp and Silver was, I was tired, and we still had to get ourselves back to campus later. “I’ll get everything signed and back to the team tonight. I just want my dad’s work to be in good hands.”

“It will be, Jojo. This was a good move.”

He signed off, and I shut my laptop, relaxing my head against the couch and basking in Noah’s continued ministrations.

After a few quiet minutes, I asked him, “When are Zach and Bennett coming home?”

“On their way now,” he replied. “Be proud of Zach—Bennett says he stayed out of the cage even after Max called him a ‘pampered pretty boy prince.’”

“Ugh, Max,” I growled, which turned into a tiny moan as Noah fisted my hair with a gentle tug.

“Relax, sweet girl,” he murmured. “Zach behaved, and they’ll both be home in one piece any minute now.”

Zach and Bennett had spent the day working on their own projects before they’d fucked off to Dom’s gym to blow off steam. Zach promised me that he would stick to light weights and bag work because I’d discovered that the key to his obedience was not threatening him with violence—that only turned him on—but instead issuing a firm warning that the muffin shop would close if I found even one new bruise on his perfect body.

His eyes had widened in genuine horror, and he’d sworn to me that he’d be good.

Bennett, on the other hand, went to fight. He’d decided he was going to prove himself to the numerous members of the Shadows that frequented Dom’s gym that he was not, in fact, a *pampered pretty boy prince*, but a fucking force to be reckoned with.

I wept inside over missing what was likely Bennett in his tiny gym shorts dominating in the cage while I met with Zepp, finishing my tasks for the day.

The sacrifices I made so that I could crush my enemies.

I dropped my laptop to the floor next to me before I twisted in my spot and climbed onto the couch, draping my body across Noah’s like I was his blanket. I tucked my face into the crook of his neck,

and he wrapped his arms around me in a snug, safe hug that I never wanted to leave.

“Back to the real world tomorrow,” I mumbled into his neck.

He sighed, squeezing me tighter.

We’d head back to the Academy tonight and be back in class tomorrow morning like nothing at all had happened over the last three days.

Like we hadn’t discovered the Families had murdered my parents just to *steal* from them.

Like Bennett hadn’t killed my uncle right in front of me for what he’d done to us.

Like Zach hadn’t been kidnapped by his own mother before we decimated the entire Ferrero Enforcer team and stole the most valuable asset from their ranks.

But we knew it was only a matter of time before the Families caught up, and then we’d see what they had in store for us.

CHAPTER FIVE

BENNETT



I'd once thought that the day I publicly rebuked the Spencer Family—if it ever came at all—would be accompanied by feelings of terror, apprehension, and guilt. I assumed that if I ever decided to stand against my father, I'd still have doubts lurking in the back of my mind like a disease, telling me that I wasn't doing the right thing—that Spencer was still my future if I would just be patient and hold on for better days.

I felt none of those things as I strode into the dining hall on Friday morning with Jolie's smaller hand tucked into mine. As soon as we'd begun our walk from her dorm apartment to Holywell Hall, I laced my fingers firmly through hers in a way that dared her to argue with me. She'd raised an eyebrow at me, but the smile that tugged at the corner of her mouth told me all I needed to know. Zach and Noah had fallen in behind us after tossing identical understanding looks my way.

This was my first open declaration of "fuck you" to my father, and I was so damn proud to be doing it with Jolie Knight's hand in mine.

The best friend he'd taken from me just so he could steal her Family's legacy while he pretended they'd done something to deserve it.

The innocent little girl he'd tried to murder while he acted like Spencer stood for anything other than unchecked corruption and

greed.

The now grown woman who was back to take everything from him.

"*Holy shit, they're back*," someone whispered loudly from one of the long banquet tables stationed closest to the door. Every eye in the room hit the four of us, and the loud hum of chatter cut off instantly as we made our way down the long aisle toward the front of the hall.

It didn't take long for our nosy classmates to spot Jolie's hand in mine, and the furious whispers began.

"Looks like we're caught," Jolie murmured as we walked, her head held high and her gorgeous eyes scanning the room with cool intensity like the queen she was. "I suggest you warn your groupies that I have a knife in my boot and am feeling extra stabby today."

"Behave yourself, Angel," I chided her, stifling a smile and the beginnings of an erection while Zach and Noah both chuckled behind us. "Everyone here will understand that you're mine in short order."

"Ours," Zach said.

"Ours," I agreed.

Jolie squeezed my hand affectionately, and I felt like I could fly.

I'd never been more content in my entire life than I had been when I woke this morning to find my Angel sleeping peacefully in my arms, her white-blonde hair fanned across the tattoo on my bare chest that I wore in her honor. Noah had wrapped himself around her back, their legs intertwined, while Zach had starfished out in the rest of the open mattress space of Jolie's giant bed, all of us too tired after the events of the past two days to do anything but pass out in a pile after we'd gotten back to campus last night.

I was relieved to discover that not only was I unbothered by the presence of other men in bed with *my* girl, but that it felt *right*. Because it was us—the Heirs, my brothers and me and the love of our lives—all together again.

This was my Family.

I led the group up to our familiar table on the raised dais, and Jolie shot me a questioning glance.

“I threatened the dining manager within an inch of his life,” I replied casually. “I want them all to see you up here with us.”

As we ascended the stairs, the whispering around us intensified. I pulled a chair from the head of the table for Jolie, and she smirked at my chivalry, patting my suited chest as she pranced past me, her hips swaying in her tight jeans in a way that had all three of us staring at her ass in front of the entire school.

Before she could sit down, I grabbed her chin and brought her lips to mine, and I drank in her little moan like it was the finest wine.

The ear-splitting shriek that sounded from the front tables was as predictable as it was obnoxious.

“Bennett!” Harper screeched as she marched toward the dais. “What do you think you’re doing? We are *engaged*!” She waved her ringed hand around like we all needed the reminder, while her right hand hung limp at her side, her broken wrist encased in a white cast.

Jolie blew out a frustrated breath, and I kept my possessive grip on her chin as I smiled down at her. “I apologize, Angel.” I made sure my voice carried to the front tables. “Let me take care of this. I’ll just be a minute.”

The pleased flush that hit her pale, freckled cheeks made everything worth it.

I spun on my heel and stepped to the edge of the dais, ensuring that Harper remained on the floor below me and did not have the chance to start marching up the short stairs.

“Bennett, we have a *contract*!” she squawked, coming to an abrupt halt at my feet. “You cannot seriously be taking up with that vulgar bitch! I won’t allow it. My *father* won’t allow it!”

“*Quiet*,” I barked, and the entire hall went eerily silent.

“Bennett—”

“I said, *quiet.*” I peered down my nose at her, channeling my father whenever he wanted to make someone feel particularly small. “You dare insult an Heir of the Four Families of Saint Gabriel City?”

She gaped at me for a fraction of a second before she stood taller, her usual self-important air returning. “I would never insult you, Bennett. You’re my future husband. I was talking about that skank—”

“Do not finish that sentence,” I said, keeping a deceptively even tone. “You do not insult the Knight Heir. You do not even look at her.

She is so far above you that you're lucky—*all* of you are lucky—to even be allowed to breathe the same air as her."

"Man, he always has to one-up us," Zach muttered behind me.

"Shh," Jolie whispered. "I love *all* my presents from you guys, and this one has been a long time coming."

It sure had, and I was such a stubborn fucking idiot for taking this long.

"Bennett, I don't know what's gotten into you," Harper seethed below me. "But I think you've forgotten we have a legal, binding contract. We're getting married, and we're going to rule this City *together*."

"I have some news about that, actually, Harper," I replied. "The marriage contract in question was between you and the Spencer Heir. As of this morning, I've resigned from Spencer and am no longer the Heir. My father has been notified, and our contract is now null and void."

"He did *what*?" Jolie hissed behind me.

"His father was going to find out soon enough, sweetheart," Noah murmured.

And I was only sorry I hadn't been a fly on the wall when Elise undoubtedly delivered my terse message over my father's morning coffee.

I let an amused smile play across my lips as I said to Harper, "Unless, of course, my father finds a new Heir. I suspect he'll be in the market for one, and you're more than welcome to chase whoever that unfortunate soul is for the status bump you're so pathetically desperate for."

Snickers sounded from the crowd, and Harper was back to fish-mouthed gaping at me, like what I was saying to her just didn't compute. I was sure it didn't—she was the type of highest Tier heir who'd never been told no with respect to anything ever in her life, and I was thrilled to be the first person to toss that bucket of ice water on her head.

I hoped it was as cold as the Obsidian River in December.

I regarded her coolly. "Was there anything else you needed, Harper? My breakfast is getting cold, and I'd like to spend some time with my girlfriend before class."

Her stunned silence continued. The color had drained from her face that was at first flushed with rage and now pale with shock. I gave her my back, ready to move on from this bullshit forever, when she finally sputtered, “You can’t just *resign* as an Heir! That’s ridiculous, Bennett. You’re a *Spencer*.”

I glanced at Jolie where she leaned casually against the front of our table, watching, with Zach and Noah pressed in tight on either side of her, and the warm smile full of love she beamed my way was like nothing I’d ever felt in my entire life.

My Angel was here with me—with *us*—and we were going to face this cruel fucking City together.

I tossed a careless look over my shoulder at Harper. “No. I’m a Knight.”



It only took until the end of the lunch hour for the other shoe to drop.

The four of us had exited the dining hall to the usual stares and whispers, Jolie and I heading to crew practice, Zach to the gym, and Noah to his Friday afternoon office hours, when Dean Jansen stepped into our path.

“Your parents are here,” she said, her words brisk and peevish. “I have taken the liberty of clearing the library and reserving the largest conference room there for your meeting.” She paused, her pursed lips contorting as her gaze landed on Jolie. “You are not invited, Miss Knight.”

I wrapped an arm around Jolie’s waist, and she leaned into my body as she stared down the Dean of Holywell Academy like she was nothing. Zach chuckled from her other side, lifting the hand that held hers to place a delicate kiss to her wrist. Noah sighed from my left, lifting his phone to his face to check the time like this whole thing was an annoying inconvenience.

“I think we both know I’ll be going wherever I’d like, whenever I’d like, Dean Jansen,” Jolie said lightly. “Unless you’d like to see what kind of challenge campus security wants to give me? Might be fun, but it would make a pretty nasty mess, and the boys here would be

late to their meeting. They're just as bloodthirsty as I am, and we've all had a rough few days."

"Miss Knight, such threats are uncalled for," the dean snapped. "This is a Family matter, not a Holywell matter, and it is not *campus* security you should be concerned about."

Zach snickered. "Should we tell the good dean here what you did to the best Enforcers in Ferrero two nights ago, Princess?"

Jolie gave him an indulgent smile. "None of it was as beautifully brutal as what you did to your mom's bodyguard, Zach. I still have a picture of his mutilated corpse on my phone. Should we show the dean?"

I coughed, but then I remembered I didn't give a fuck about decorum anymore.

Dean Jansen's face turned whiter than her daughter's had when I'd dismissed her in front of the entire school this morning. "That's… q-quite enough," she sputtered. "I suggest you do not keep the heads of the Families waiting."

We watched as she stalked away, her cream pantsuit swishing with her hurried steps. I sighed, still clinging to Jolie, and I looked each member of my Family in the eyes.

"It's time," I said. "We'll give them the meeting they want, and then there's no going back."

They each nodded, smirks and bored looks wiped away. Only steely determination remained.

We made the ten-minute trek across the quad in silence, and the bright sun of the warm spring afternoon failed to burn away the dark cloud that descended over me as we neared the library.

I would face my father for the first time since I'd found out the depraved reason he murdered the Knights and took my Angel from me, and it would take all of my strength not to end him where he stood.



The Holywell Academy library was once a cathedral that held Catholic mass nightly before money became the one true religion of

Saint Gabriel City. We entered the arched wooden doors and processed single file down the aisle, Jolie leading despite the dark look I gave her when my instincts screamed that she do otherwise—which she ignored.

The rows of long study tables had been deserted, the dimly lit chandeliers that hung from the vaulted ceiling above them glinting in the bright light that streamed through the stained-glass windows. At the back of the library, what once had been the altar was now closed off with a wooden door that led to study rooms and the largest conference room on campus.

Four Enforcers stood sentry there, and I recognized one of them as part of my father's detail.

As we neared, the Enforcer stationed in front of the door barked, "This is a closed meeting, Heirs only—"

Without breaking stride, Jolie reached behind her to pull two daggers from the pockets of her little black backpack and launched them at the Enforcer who'd spoken, pinning him to the door by his shoulders like a butterfly to a board.

"Fuck me, I'm so turned on," Zach muttered. Noah and I grunted in agreement as we hurried after her.

Our sweet little best friend had risen from the grave deadly as a viper and sexy as fucking sin. It was a miracle the three of us could ever manage to focus on anything else while in her presence.

The impaled Enforcer shouted in panic as the other three shook themselves from their shock and reached for their weapons. Zach, Noah, and I drew our own pistols before they could, and they froze, wide-eyed and inexplicably confused by our hostility.

It seemed our parents hadn't been truthful even with the people tasked to keep them safe.

"Release those magazines, boys," Jolie commanded. "This isn't a friendly meeting."

They did as they were told, but only after Noah buried a bullet in the wood an inch from butterfly-guy's ear.

Once they'd disarmed their own weapons, Zach and I made quick work of the four of them, leaving them huddled on the floor, pissed off, with their hands cuffed behind their backs.

“It’s been a pleasure, Sanders,” I said to the man I recognized from my father’s team as I stood from my crouch next to him. “Don’t get any ideas.”

“So, it really is true, then?” He wrinkled his nose in disgust as he shook his head. “You’ve turned on Spencer.”

I stared down at him, blank mask in place. “It turned on me first.”

He scoffed before muttering under his breath, “Must be *some* pussy.”

“Uh-oh,” Noah said while Zach let out a snort, the two of them flanking Jolie by the door.

I pulled my pistol from my suit jacket and fired a single bullet into Sanders’ kneecap, shattering it instantly. He let out a pained roar, and the rest of the group began shouting in alarm, struggling with their restraints.

“Anyone else have anything smart to say?” I asked them in a bored voice.

They quieted, and I tucked my gun away. I joined my Family by the door, taking a second to steal a scorching kiss from my Angel.

“God, you’re fucking hot,” she murmured against my lips.

I smirked. “And you’re fucking mine. Let’s go inform my father.”

CHAPTER SIX

JOLIE



We entered the library's conference room to find Peter Hargraves, Andrea Ferrero, and James Spencer alone and not so patiently waiting for their sons.

All three sets of eyes snapped to me as I entered one step ahead of my boys, still twirling the bloody knives through my fingers that I'd unceremoniously yanked from the shoulders of the Ferrero flunky I'd stuck to the door.

Peter and Andrea both sat behind the table. Peter lazed with his legs crossed, while Andrea sat ramrod straight, her dark eyes hard and her normally pale cheeks flushed.

James Spencer lingered behind them, standing tall under the high windows of the back wall, his hands fisted at his sides. The look of loathing he aimed my way would've made a lesser woman cower in the corner, but I was not a lesser woman.

I was his worst fucking nightmare, and now I had his son.

"Oh, goodness, Jolie, that is really not necessary," Peter said, eyeing my knives and giving me a patronizing smile. "We aren't here to hurt anyone." He ran a nervous hand through his wavy, barely graying blond hair as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The gesture reminded me so much of my Noah, and it made me despise Peter even more.

“History says otherwise, Mr. Hargraves,” I replied as the guys spread out beside me so that we stood in a line, a united front against the Families.

“Yes, well,” Peter began in a smooth voice, still hanging onto that smile. “I think—”

“Shut up, Dad,” Noah snapped, and the way the smile dropped from Peter’s face was a thing of beauty. “You don’t speak to Jolie. Not after what you’ve done to her.”

Peter sighed. “Noah, if you would have just taken my calls, we could have *discussed* all of this. Obviously, I did not know you were at the Hargraves Tech offices when I sent the team in—”

“Dad.” Noah gave my hand a quick squeeze before he stepped forward and took up a power stance right in front of his father, towering over him with his arms crossed over his hard chest and glaring down at Peter with disgust. “I said, shut *the fuck* up. You’re done here. You know it, and I know it. Hargraves is mine now, and as of yesterday, the last of your major investors have dumped you and joined me under the Knight umbrella. Say your goodbyes to this City and fuck back off to the Maldives or wherever the hell you’ve been wasting your days.”

I squeezed my thighs together and took a calming breath. Noah was using his dominant voice, and it was turning me the fuck on.

Not the time.

“Peter, get some fucking control, *now*,” James barked.

Peter tossed him an irritated glance over his shoulder before turning back to his son, trying once more to force a smile. “Noah, I am so proud of how you’ve handled things while I’ve been away. I am certainly ready to let you step into a leadership role, but this nonsense with Knight has to stop. We do not let people steal from us.”

I snorted, and Noah’s cold smile was so vicious that even Andrea looked alarmed. “You’re right, Dad,” he said, leaning down to place his palms on the table, his navy suit stretching across his broad shoulders with the movement. “When stealing from a member of the Four Families, we make sure to kill them first, including their innocent children, isn’t that right?”

James and Andrea's heads both snapped to Noah then, and all three of them watched him warily. This was the first indication any of us had given that we might know the truth about my parents' murders.

Peter gawked at Noah like he didn't recognize him at all. "Son, I don't know what's gotten into you. I'm offering you the helm of Hargraves, but you need to reverse course, and quickly."

"You're still not listening, Dad," Noah growled, and I stifled a moan. "I already have the *helm*. It's all mine. I even bought out the entirety of Hargraves Tower yesterday and awarded a contract to an up-and-coming builder from the Southside. She's going to help me turn the first ten floors into a state-of-the-art healthcare center for low-income citizens. Isn't that great?"

Peter gasped in alarm. "Noah!"

"Enough, Peter," James snarled. "You've been outplayed by your own son because you're never fucking *here*."

Noah stood again, giving his dad his back and rejoining our line. He paused in front of me to press a lingering kiss to my temple while I grinned savagely at his father.

"And if you think you'll still be sitting pretty on top of all your dirty drug money, Mr. Hargraves," I said, "Knight's new head of security is taking out all of your stash houses in Industrial City as we speak. I think you're about to have some unhappy customers."

He paled while Zach barked out a laugh. "Oh shit, did you guys let Frankie play with the flamethrower after all?"

My grin widened. "We sure did."

"Zachary!" Andrea snapped, the mention of Frankie and Industrial City likely reigniting her fury. "That… *mess* you made a few days ago was ridiculous and unnecessary. You are continuing to let that *bitch* cloud your judgment."

Zach shrugged, eyeing his mother with amusement. "You fuck with the bull and you get the horns, Mom. I told you, and I *definitely* told Ramon, repeatedly—for years—not to fuck with me. Then I warned you both not to fuck with my Princess. How's the hunt for a new security team treating you?"

She bristled. "Where is your uncle?"

“Weren’t you listening?” Now Zach’s smile had vanished, and he was every bit as cold as I’d ever seen Bennett at his stoniest moment. “He’s out lighting up every last bit of Peter’s drug inventory. He works for Jolie now because she treats him like a fucking human being.”

Andrea swallowed, the thought of being on the wrong side of Frankie unsettling to just about anyone, before she let the rage descend. “You do not want to oppose me, Zachary. I will crush you into dust and remold you into something I can actually be proud of, and I’ll make sure you’re watching as I slit your girlfriend’s throat right in front of you.”

Zach’s guns flew from their shoulder holsters under his suit jacket. Andrea’s eyes widened as he aimed them both right at her head. “Say that again, Mom. Threaten the woman I love one more time.”

She sagged a bit in her chair, waving a dismissive hand in his direction. “Honestly, Zachary. I am your *mother*. You’re not going to shoot me, for crying out loud.”

“Try me,” he growled. “And try rebuilding Ferrero’s security team after Jolie Knight destroyed the best you had and stole Frankie Fingers from you. Try to keep your gun-running operation going after I purchased every open mercenary contract on the market yesterday. Knight Tower is now a fucking fortress, and Ferrero is a festering open wound. I’m done, Mom. Fuck you, and fuck Ferrero.”

My heart warmed even as my stomach dipped under a burst of nerves. Zach had worked his ass off after his rescue to hit his mom at her most vulnerable—and to keep her that way—all while making sure we had the most secure tower in the City. I loved him so much for it, but I worried for him nonetheless.

Andrea sniffed, her cold, dark glare sliding straight to me.

I knew, as the guys did, that their parents were going to hold out hope that their Heirs would return to them—that if they could get me out of the way, I’d no longer be there to lure them away from the Families with my wild fantasies and magical pussy.

I returned her stare. “Enjoy that sinking ship, Andrea. When I’m through with you, you’ll be on your knees, begging me for mercy—

mercy that you didn't show my mother when you laughed in her face as you shot her."

"Enough of this!" James thundered. He strode forward, now standing at the table between a seething Andrea and a shell-shocked Peter. His menacing stare shifted from me over to Bennett, like he'd been about to unload on me before he remembered he had his own Family issues to address. "What the hell is wrong with you, Bennett? Your friends being hypnotized by a cunt is one thing, but *you*? I thought you were better than this, and now you're about to irreparably fuck things up with the Jansens."

Bennett returned his father's fury with a cold, bored stare. "I've resigned as the Spencer Heir, Father. Or did Elise forget to inform you of that during a moment when your dick wasn't down her throat?"

Zach and Noah both snorted, and I discreetly picked my jaw up off the floor. Bennett had never dared even *look* at his father wrong in all the time we'd been friends. I knew he'd grown into his own man over the years, and I trusted his deep devotion to me now, but to say it was a shock to see him not only oppose his father but sling an insult at him in the flesh was a gross understatement.

"That's nonsense, *son*," he spat, seething. "I knew you weren't nearly ready to step into a leadership role at Spencer, but I never thought you were this stupid."

I tensed, my dagger hand feeling twitchy. Bennett ran a soothing palm down my back from his spot next to me. "Ah, well, I always was such a disappointment," he replied casually. "I would think you're glad to be rid of me, Father."

James slammed his hand down on the table, and only Peter flinched. "Stop saying that shit." He stepped away from the table, pulling his phone from his pocket to glare at it, then shoved it back into his pants before looking at Bennett again. "Where is your mother?"

Bennett shrugged. "She's a grown woman, and last time I checked, she wasn't a prisoner in Spencer Tower. Maybe she got tired of hearing her husband fucking the help right down the hall."

Jesus Christ, Bennett wasn't here to play.

And he also wasn't going to tell his dad that Bridgette Spencer was safely ensconced in an adorable condo Bennett had purchased with his Alastia money a few blocks from my family's home in Olde Town. I actually knew for a fact that as of half an hour ago, she was drinking tea with Laura in her store while they discussed their favorite books—with Martinez in tow. Bennett had threatened him with a very painful death should one blonde hair on either of their heads be harmed on his watch.

"She hasn't been home in three days, and there's been no activity on her card," James said, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. "Or yours. Are you so desperate to rebel against me that you're borrowing money from Knight?"

Bennett cracked a smile. "Jealous, Father? Hargraves is dead, Ferrero is dying, and Spencer is right behind them both. Knight is already more powerful than it ever was, and Jolie isn't even finished with you yet."

Peter scoffed. "You boys are delusional if you think Knight is more powerful than the Families."

"In that little bitch's dreams," Andrea sneered.

James blew out a frustrated breath, shooting them both some menacing side-eye before he ran his enraged gaze over the boys. "We will give the three of you one last chance to do the right thing and return to the Families. I'm confident that when your little girlfriend is six feet under for daring to challenge us, you'll remember that you can have literally any piece of pussy in this City, and you'll *thank* us for setting you back on the path you were born to walk. Nothing is worth giving up your place as Heirs of the Four Families of Saint Gabriel City. Do you hear me? *Nothing*."

I felt the boys tense next to me. As impervious as they were to their parents' insults and threats against them, they were a lot more sensitive when those insults and threats were directed at me.

Bennett squeezed my hand, and I knew he was about to turn this meeting over to me. He looked at his father one last time. "Jolie Knight is the love of my life, and you took her from me. You slaughtered her parents right in front of her and ordered the same for her—an eleven-year-old *child*—and then you lied to me about it for *years*. You claimed they'd broken the code of the Families—that

Jeffrey Knight and his entire Family deserved to be dragged into that conference room and executed. We know now what a crock of shit that was, and we're *never* coming back to the Families. You three made your bed, now you have to fucking *lie in it*."

James paled, while Andrea's face had grown redder, if that was even possible. Peter appeared puzzled, like he just couldn't comprehend that we'd somehow discovered the truth and that his son could really be finished with him forever.

I stepped forward, feeling so much strength in the wake of Bennett's impassioned declaration. With my boys standing behind me, I was unstoppable.

I was *loved*.

"I was just wondering, Mr. Spencer," I said, examining my dagger as I twirled it lazily through my fingers. "Have you heard from Anders lately?"

It took him a moment to tear his wide-eyed stare from Bennett, but those evil brown eyes finally slid over to me. "Your uncle appears to be missing," he said through gritted teeth. "And I suspect you're about to tell me that you know where he is."

I chuckled, all of my energy focused on keeping a light, unaffected air in front of the man who'd killed my dad when I really just wanted to rage and tear his still-beating heart from his body. "I actually don't know where he ended up." I tossed a look over my shoulder at Zach. "Does your cleanup crew have a favorite dumping ground?"

He smirked at me. "They have a few, Princess. Want me to get an exact location so we can head out there and piss on his grave?"

I blew him a kiss. "Next date night, babe."

"*Enough*," James spat. "Congratulations, Miss Knight. You've apparently murdered your own uncle. And here I thought the deaths of your family members were why we're all here in the first place."

"No," I snapped. "I did not kill my uncle—though I would have loved to have had the pleasure. Your *son* killed my uncle with his bare fucking fists. Do you want to hazard a guess as to why?"

All three of them glared at me in silence. They knew what was coming.

“That’s right. Anders confessed to everything because he thought I was going to hand him the keys to the kingdom he’s been desperate for all these years. Bennett did not take kindly to hearing how my uncle sold his own flesh and blood to you three criminals for the false promise of money, power, and apparently that reprehensible cunt, Elise Proctor.”

“Preach,” Zach muttered.

James Spencer finally took a seat at the table, feigning calm, but I knew he was seeing the hope they’d all held onto of finally getting their hands on my father’s discovery dissolving right in front of his eyes. He steepled his fingers under his chin and gave me an assessing once-over.

“I assume you’ve unlocked your father’s flash drive.”

“Yes.”

“And I assume you’ve ascertained the value of what was contained there.”

“Yes.”

“So, you understand that your father would have had the power to ruin all of us. To destroy the institution of the Four Families because he found it so… *distasteful*. To upend the way things are done in this City. To bury Hargraves, Ferrero, and Spencer if he so chose.” He leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest, and his hard stare once again darted to Bennett, almost *imploring*. “We made a calculated decision to defend the Families. You would have done the same in our shoes.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Father,” Bennett replied, bored. “How does it feel to sit there today and know that it was all for nothing?”

Noah chimed in, staring at his own dad like he was a bug under his shoe. “How does it feel, Dad, to know that by murdering two innocent people and attempting to murder a child just to steal the tech breakthrough of the decade, you’ve now lost your Heir and all of Hargraves?”

“And how does it feel, Mom,” Zach added with his own maniacal grin, “to know that I hate you so much for what you did to my girl that I broke every bone in the body of the one man left on the planet who could stand your presence for more than ten minutes? That I’m

going to enjoy every second of watching the love of my life tear down what's left of Ferrero brick by brick?"

"And how does it feel to know, illustrious leaders of the Four Families of Saint Gabriel City," I went on, because we hadn't even gotten to the real kicker. "That the one thing you wanted—the thing that set all of this in motion—is so far out of your reach now that you will never, ever have it? Miraculene is now the property of the Knight Foundation, and we've gifted all of my dad's research to universities around the globe. The money made from this revolutionary technology will be going into scholarships and grants for low-income students. *Nobody* is going to become obscenely rich from my dad's work, and the world is going to be a better fucking place because of it."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" James shouted.

"Noah, I think we should talk about this—" Peter began.

"Zachary, you will speak to me this instant—" Andrea barked.

"We're done here," I announced. "It's over for you three. I'm coming for what's left of the Families. The Shadows are coming for you, too, and your sons will be with us every step of the way."

The silence stretched for what felt like hours as we all stared at one another, resignation finally seeping into each of their addled minds.

Eventually, James spoke, his words low and dark. "We will not hold back. We will end you, little girl, and our sons will watch it happen as punishment for their terrible decisions. There are no rules in this game, but you will *not* create a mess like the one you made in Industrial City at this Academy."

Oh, God forbid the Families' crown jewel be tainted by the war they started seven and a half years ago. They wanted things to seem like business as usual, and a big part of that was having the Heirs they hoped would return to them continue to go to class like nothing was amiss.

"Fine," I said. It benefited us to have the Academy as a neutral zone, anyway.

"Let's go, Angel," Bennett said, and James blanched at the beautiful name his son had given me. "I'm tired of my father's eyes being on you."

I clasped his hand in mine, and Noah threaded his fingers through my other one. We gave their parents our backs.

“Noah!” Peter’s voice was desperate.

“Zachary!” Andrea shrieked.

“Bennett.” A last low, threatening growl from James.

We slammed the conference room doors in their faces, marched past their still-bound guards, and my boys left the Four Families behind for good.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JOLIE



We'd just stepped across the threshold of my dorm apartment when I was lifted off my feet and thrown over a broad shoulder.

"Bennett!" I screeched as my chest hit his suited back. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He didn't answer, instead just tightening his grip around my legs as he strode toward my bedroom.

"Oh, fuck yeah," Zach said from behind us as he closed the front door. "I like where this is going."

I lifted my head to glare at him, my body bouncing around Bennett's back as he walked. Noah shot me a wink as he and Zach hurried along behind us.

Then I watched their eager smiles disappear as Bennett slammed my bedroom door in their faces.

As he turned the deadbolt, a fist pounded on the door. "Come on, man!" Zach shouted. "No fair!"

"Sharing is caring, Bennett," Noah added.

Bennett finally dropped me to my feet only to smash me up against the door, his big body covering mine as he ran his hands over my jean-clad ass and began to drag his lips up my neck, ending any protest I'd been about to make regarding the locked door between me and my other boyfriends.

“Do you two assholes think I’ve forgotten what you made me watch after that god-fucking-awful engagement party?” he growled at Zach and Noah through the door.

A beat of silence, then they both snickered. “You deserved that,” Noah said.

“You did,” I agreed as I dug my hands under Bennett’s suit jacket to explore his muscular back. “And no one *made* you stay.”

He yanked me away from the door, lifting me by my butt so that my legs looped around his waist as he walked, then he dumped me unceremoniously onto my bed.

“Don’t worry, Angel,” he said with a wicked grin that had my panties wet in an instant. He threw his jacket off and began loosening his tie. “I’ll still let them watch.”

He pulled his phone from his pocket and typed something onto the screen. He yanked his tie from his neck and tossed it to the floor next to his jacket before striding over to my dresser and standing his phone against my jewelry box. I could just make out the live feed of me sprawled out on my bed playing on its screen.

I heard the muffled sound of both Zach and Noah’s phones vibrating out in the hallway. “Oh, well played, Spencer,” Noah said with a laugh. “Sweetheart, he’s sent us a link to a livestream.”

“Dude, just let us in. If I’m gonna watch, I want the real deal,” Zach griped.

“Fuck off and take what you’re given,” Bennett barked at the door as he prowled toward me, slowly unbuttoning his dress shirt while he raked his hot gaze over my entire body.

I lay still, utterly captivated by him and mind-meltingly turned on by the fact that Zach and Noah were going to watch as Bennett did unspeakable things to me in this room.

His shirt fell to the floor, revealing his broad, sculpted chest decorated with *my* wings, then his pants followed. By the time he reached the foot of my bed, he was clad only in his tight black boxer briefs and sporting a monster bulge that made my mouth water and my pussy clench with need.

He jerked me toward him by my ankles, then he set about unbuttoning the silky purple blouse I’d picked to wear with my dark jeans and boots today. “Do you know, Angel,” he said as he lost

patience and ripped my shirt apart, the last few buttons flying onto the comforter. “How many times I fucked my fist before I could fucking think straight after I watched you come on Zach’s face?”

Zach made a pained noise out in the hall, and I gasped as Bennett slid my pants and panties down to my ankles in one smooth pull. “Tell me,” I demanded, my voice slipping into a moan as he cupped my lace-clad breasts in his big hands, now laser-focused on them.

“Three,” he replied, unclasping my bra at the front with one deft flick of his fingers. “Three times. And it wasn’t fucking enough. It was never going to be enough. You were under my skin and in my soul and I never hated and loved something so much all at once in my entire life.”

He ducked down to suck my nipple into his mouth while he tweaked the other with his fingers. Then he switched, sinking his teeth into my other nipple, and I hissed at the twinge of pain. “Careful, Spencer. I have teeth too.”

“Yeah, bite him, Princess,” Zach said.

Bennett, calling my bluff, released my nipple with an audible pop before slamming his lips onto mine. He pinned my hands to the bed as our tongues tangled in a dance for dominance before I caught his lower lip between my teeth and bit down hard.

“Fuck,” he swore, releasing one of my hands so he could grip my chin, holding me still as he claimed another brutal, possessive kiss. “Behave, Angel. I am going to do so many filthy fucking things to you, and you’re going to enjoy every last second of it.”

I bared my teeth at him. “Not if I do filthy fucking things to you first.”

“You tell him, sweetheart,” Noah called out.

Bennett arched a brow at my challenge, delicious fire behind those mossy eyes, before he yanked my boots off my feet, followed by my pants, then I was completely naked and back in his arms again, my legs wrapped around his hips as his hands gripped my ass. I pulled his face to mine and shoved my tongue down his throat as he walked us to the wall opposite my dresser, and he groaned, opening for me like a good boy.

I was pleased with myself until my back was slammed against the wall and my naked body suddenly hefted high. Before I could register what was happening, my legs had been thrown over Bennett's shoulders and his face was buried in my pussy.

"Oh fuck," Zach swore from behind the door. "Seriously? Now he's just showing off."

I moaned, weaving my fingers into Bennett's hair as they scrambled for purchase, but he had me pinned tight to the wall as he ran his tongue from my ass to my clit again and again.

"Does that feel good, sweetheart?" Noah asked, his voice dropping into that gruff, dominant register that made me fucking gush. "Do you like Bennett's tongue in your pussy? You look so pretty up on that wall."

"Yes!" I cried as Bennett wrapped his lips around my clit with a possessive growl. "Oh my God, yes. It's so fucking good."

"Then come on his face, Princess," Zach rasped with need. "Noah and I want to see you fall apart up there."

Bennett picked up the pace, sucking and licking and devouring me like a man possessed until I tipped over the edge, screaming and gripping his hair as a wave of ecstasy shot from my core through my entire body.

I heard Zach groan before Noah said, "Good girl," with a little moan of his own.

Bennett gave me a few more slow licks, like he was savoring my taste, before he carefully let me slide down the wall and back into his arms.

"Fucking perfect, Angel," he rumbled, capturing my mouth again.

"Mmm, I love you," I mumbled against his lips like a smitten fool, and I felt him grin.

He carried me back to my bed, this time laying me gently down on the mattress before crawling on top of my body. He loomed over me, his hands on either side of my head as he studied my face with his familiar intensity. "I love you, too, Angel. You are the light of my fucking life and my reason for getting out of bed every morning. I will give you everything you've ever wanted, including my father's head on a silver fucking platter." He dipped a hand down to slide two thick

fingers inside of me, and I gasped, both at the intrusion and at his impassioned words as they soaked into my body.

“Bennett,” I moaned.

“Now we’re going to show Zach and Noah how well you take my cock. Would you like that, Angel?”

I *would* like that, but he’d had the upper hand too long.

Using all of my strength, I rolled us just like I would have if we’d been grappling in the cage. The move took him by surprise, and he grunted as I straddled his ripped torso, the wet heat of my core now planted solidly over his dick—still inexplicably encased in his boxers.

“How about I take your cock how *I* want it, Bennett?” I taunted him, reaching between us to free that beast from its cage. It was solid steel and heavy in my hand as I stroked him lightly, and I dove in to take his mouth again.

He groaned, wrapping one big hand around my throat while the other shot to my breast, and he accepted my hungry kiss while I worked his dick faster with my hand.

“Way to put him in his place, Princess,” Zach called out.

“It’s not going to last,” Noah muttered before he said, louder, “Sweetheart, better put that dick where you want it before he does it himself.”

Bennett tore his mouth from mine, moving to nip at my earlobe before he shouted, “Shut the fuck up out there!”

I went to slide down his body, ready to *own* him by fitting as much of that big dick into my mouth as possible, but he grabbed me by the biceps and halted my progress. Then he flipped us, rolling me onto my stomach before pinning me to the bed.

“Fuck you,” I hissed as I bucked against him. “Let me put your cock in my mouth, asshole.”

“Later, Angel,” he replied before plunging his finger into my wetness again. “It’s cute that you think you’re in charge when we’re fucking.” He removed his finger from my pussy, and I had two seconds of warning as he circled that slick finger around the tight ring of my ass.

“Bennett,” I growled.

“Tell me no,” he demanded, increasing the pressure.

I did not tell him no. Instead, I pressed my ass back against him, taking the tip of his finger into my body all on my own.

“Fuck,” he bit out, then he slid his finger all the way into my ass.

I whimpered at the intoxicating mix of pain and pleasure, fisting the comforter next to my head as Bennett shifted behind me, arching over my back and pressing kisses down my spine as he slowly and carefully pumped his finger in and out of my tight hole.

“Aw, sweetheart, where’s Bennett’s finger right now?” Noah purred.

“It’s in my ass,” I moaned.

Zach let out a pleased rumble. “Does that feel good, baby girl?”

“Yes,” I sighed before tossing Bennett a serious look over my shoulder. “You’re not putting your monster cock in my ass.”

“Hmm,” he said, now kneeling behind me and studying his finger as it moved in and out of my body. “No, not today, Angel. But I know you can take *anything* I give you because you were made for me.”

“Stop fucking around and put your dick in my pussy,” I snapped. “Give it to me, Bennett.”

“You heard the lady, Spencer!” Noah yelled.

Zach chimed in, “Better fuck her right, man, or I’m breaking this door down and doing it myself.”

Bennett gently removed his finger from my ass and rolled me onto my back. He bent down to steal a filthy kiss before he said, “Fine. Let’s make sure those two fully comprehend what I’m about to do to you.”

He stood, finally peeling his boxers all the way off, and he marched over to my dresser and grabbed his phone, returning to stand between my open legs, his huge dick jutting proudly from his carved body. He dragged my ass to the edge of the bed and lined himself up with my dripping wet core.

He held the phone up. “You want me to show them how I stretch you so fucking wide, Angel?”

I shivered. “Yes. Show them.”

He aimed the camera down at where we were joined, and he pushed into me so painstakingly slowly that my eyes rolled back into my head.

“Oh *fuck*, Princess,” Zach swore as he watched what must have been an obscene picture of my pussy enveloping Bennett’s substantial girth. “Goddamn, look at you take that thing.”

“He wasn’t kidding, was he?” Noah mused. “Sweetheart, tell us how it feels.”

Bennett finally bottomed out, both of us letting out a low groan, and then his hooded eyes met mine and held them captive as he began to pump his hips, one hand still pointing the camera downward and the other wrapped around my thigh.

“It feels fucking amazing,” I replied, rocking my hips in time with Bennett’s thrusts. “I’m so full, and Bennett makes me come so *hard*.”

He growled, picking up the pace and pounding into me as I cried out for more, more, more, all while Zach and Noah shouted encouragement from the hallway, desperate to see me fall apart on their best friend’s dick.

Bennett finally abandoned the camera, tossing his phone against the pillow above me and giving Zach and Noah a prime shot of us over the top of my head. He surged forward, his big body covering mine, then he threw my legs over his shoulders and bent me in half.

“Oh, shit, oh my God, Bennett!” I wailed as he ground down on me, his big dick buried deep and his pelvis working my clit with every rock of his hips.

“Fuck *yes*,” he hissed as I contracted around him. “Come for me, Angel.”

“Come with me!” I cried, digging my nails into his shoulders as my climax crested, slamming into me like a tidal wave. “All of you. *Come with me*.”

As Bennett let out a hoarse cry and shuddered above me, I heard low, satisfied groans out in the hallway.

I wrapped my arms around Bennett, the two of us melting together in a pile of satiated goo, and I whispered in his ear, “Thank you for coming back to me.”

He cupped my cheek and brought me in for an uncharacteristically sweet, gentle kiss. “I never left you, Jolie. Not really—it just took me a little while to be brave enough to show you that.”

After a minute, he rolled off me and sauntered into the bathroom, and I ogled his round, tight ass and meaty thighs as he went. He emerged with a washcloth, diverting to the door to flick the lock before returning to the bed to clean me up.

Zach and Noah filed in, both of them clad only in their disheveled dress shirts and pants and grinning from ear to ear.

“Keep your dicks out of her,” Bennett commanded as they crawled onto the bed to cuddle me while he finished tidying up the mess between my thighs. “She needs to rest.”

“So *bossy*,” I lamented. “Not much has changed, has it?”

Bennett just shot me a warning look before he strode back toward the bathroom.

Noah chuckled as he pushed my hair off of my sweaty forehead and dropped a kiss there. “You were beautiful, sweetheart. So fucking gorgeous.”

Zach, meanwhile, ran his tongue languidly over my nipple before rolling onto his side to grin at me. “We definitely just jacked off in the hallway together watching that, Princess. You know, like bros do.”

My beast was satisfied with that. I snuggled deeper into Noah’s side, reaching for Zach’s hand to pull him in tight. Bennett returned, now wearing his boxers, and he made himself at home between my legs, laying his head on my belly.

“Let’s stay like this until dinner, then we can figure out what to do next,” I whispered, running my fingers through Bennett’s damp hair. Anything to cling to this quiet moment in the arms of all three of them before we had to face our new reality.

“Sounds good, sweetheart,” Noah murmured, his lips brushing against my shoulder, and the others hummed in agreement.

I knew I would burn the whole world down to keep these boys with me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JOLIE



It was a familiar scene, except this time, I was also sitting stiffly on the couch next to the boys while we accepted the tongue lashing we probably deserved from a loved one.

Mari paced in front of us, her heeled boots clunking against the hardwood floor of our dorm apartment, her arms crossed and a serious look on her face as she mulled over the flood of information she'd gathered since her plane had touched down in the City this morning.

"I have been gone for one week," she said, her tone deceptively light. "*One*. *Week*."

I'd known I was in trouble as soon as our door had flown open half an hour ago, and my best friend and roommate had stalked angrily inside, wheeling her Gucci carry-on beside her, her oversized sunglasses still on her face and her soft sweaterdress not even a little bit wrinkled from her transatlantic flight.

We'd been having a quiet Saturday morning, my three gorgeous boyfriends and I. Zach had made everyone breakfast—testing me by wearing only an apron and his underwear—and we'd eaten together while we talked about anything that *wasn't* the impending war we'd just declared together against the Families.

I'd been curled up in Noah's lap on the couch, lazily making out with him while Bennett and Zach cleaned up the kitchen, when Mari

had arrived. I felt terrible for not even remembering her flight back from Madrid, where she had spent the week with Carmen, was today.

But, to her point, a lot had happened while she was away.

“Imagine my surprise,” she went on, still pacing, “that when I’m making my way through the atrium downstairs, I have no less than *five* different people ambush me to confirm some very *wild* rumors.”

“Mari—” I began, but she held up a hand, cutting me off with an accusing look.

“And then I arrive home to have my alleged *best friend* not only confirm those rumors but calmly inform me that, actually, so much other crazy shit has happened?”

Zach chuckled next to me on the couch. Noah held my hand, his thumb rubbing soothing circles on my palm, though he also appeared amused. Bennett lounged in our oversized armchair, his long legs crossed as he scrolled through his phone, unperturbed by Mari’s ire.

She went on. “So, let’s recap, shall we? While I was in Spain, you discovered your dad’s revolutionary research, then you were drugged and kidnapped by your uncle, who was apparently a secret villain and the major reason your parents were murdered. He was then brutally killed by Bennett Spencer, who has now joined your harem of devoted boyfriends despite being a stubborn, broody bastard to you all these months—”

“To be fair, he’s still a stubborn, broody bastard,” I said, only to receive a dark, threatening look from Bennett over the top of his phone—a thing that used to rile me up but now only made my panties wet.

Mari ignored me, now counting on her fingers. “Then your other boyfriend was kidnapped, you rescued him with the help of a powerful, secret organization that no one in the City knew about that apparently you are *the leader of*, you decimated the Ferrero Enforcers, then you declared open warfare on the Families—*again*—on Academy grounds. Oh, and your newest boyfriend dumped his fiancée in front of the entire school. And not once, through any of this, did I receive even a text message, not to mention a *phone call*, apprising me of the situation. Do I have that right?”

I winced. “I didn’t want to… worry you.”

“Uh-huh.” She was unimpressed, and she held my apologetic stare with a look that dared me to make another excuse as she whipped her phone from her purse. She scrolled and tapped the screen to make a call, and we all sat silently as the call rang on speakerphone.

“Hey, babe,” Max’s voice purred through the phone. “You back on City soil?”

“Max, mi amor,” Mari cooed right back, and it scared the shit out of me. “¿Qué pasa? How was *your* week, hmm?”

Max caught on that he was in danger. “Um, it was… alright.”

Mari still glared at the four of us as she spoke into her phone. “Was it, now?”

“Babe…,” Max began, but it was over for him as she decided to unload in colorful Spanish, rolling her eyes at me one last time before stomping off to her room, her suitcase rolling smoothly next to her as she barked into the phone.

She slammed her door a little harder than necessary, then I sagged back into my couch cushion.

“Fuck, I’m the worst friend,” I muttered.

Noah wrapped his hand around my thigh and gave me a reassuring squeeze while Zach tossed a muscled arm around my shoulders and pulled me in close.

“She’s just worried about you,” Noah said. “I think she knows that this week was… difficult for you and that the life you lead is dangerous.”

Bennett locked his phone and slid it into the pocket of his sweatpants before his eyes met mine, a soft and understanding look lurking there. “Angel, I think you should let Mari decide how deep into this she wants to go with us. It’s understandable that you want to protect her, but she’s a big girl. And I think Zach may be able to help you make it up to her.”

I beamed an appreciative smile at Bennett and received a heart-stopping, genuine smile from him in return. I sucked in a shaky breath, ignoring the knowing chuckles from the other two, before I shifted under Zach’s arm to look at him. “What’s he talking about?”

“Well,” Zach said, pulling his own phone from its perch on the end table. “As you know, Anzaldua, as the City’s Tier One hotel giant, is affiliated with Ferrero. But my mother’s woes are becoming public knowledge, as is my defection to Knight, so we’ve had a few of Ferrero’s remaining allies see the writing on the wall and come crawling. Mari’s parents are one of them.”

I perked up. “When?”

He dropped a quick kiss on my lips before putting his phone to his ear. “Hey…. Oh, fuck you, Marcus. You can earn your giant paycheck and quit bitching…. I happen to think Silver is a *very* fair boss…. No…. Yes. Give me the latest from Anzaldua.”

As Zach listened to whatever this Marcus person was telling him, I shot a questioning look at Noah.

He grinned. “Marcus used to frequent the underground fighting rings unofficially sponsored by Ferrero. He was also a thorn in the side of the Families as a gray hat hacker that somehow hadn’t been snatched up by the Shadows. Zach talked him into joining us and put him on Silver’s team, and I think they… butt heads. He’s now Zach’s guy like Zepp is yours.”

“Oh,” I replied, feeling pleased by my boyfriend’s initiative. “Does Bennett have a guy too?” I swung my inquisitive stare in his direction.

“No one I trust,” Bennett replied. “Silver’s in charge of the Spencer side of the Shadows.”

Zach finished up his call. “Thanks, man…. Oh, fuck off. I’ll kick your ass anytime. Come down to the Southside—that’s where I train now…. Yeah, later, dude.”

Then he filled me in.

When Mari emerged from her room an hour later, now wearing the finest silk palazzo pants and a matching crop top—her Saturday loungewear—I was ready to present our proposal to her.

Noah made her a cup of coffee, and Bennett abandoned his spot in the armchair and offered it to her before taking over the corner of the couch. He tucked me neatly into his side and clasped my hand in his.

Mari appeared relaxed and at least willing to hang out in our presence—score one for me—and she eyed Bennett’s and my

intertwined hands with great interest.

“That,” she said before taking a delicate sip of her coffee, “is going to take some getting used to.”

“It was… quite a development,” I hedged. Mari knew the story now, though I’d left out the frenzied-fucking-in-my-prisoner-chair part of it all.

Zach, who was still shirtless but had put on some flannel pants since Mari’s return, cleared his throat from his spot where he was casually leaning up against our living room wall.

“Mari, Jojo and her harem of devoted boyfriends would like to have a chat with you, if that’s cool,” he said, deploying his sexy smirk.

Mari, unaffected by that move, narrowed her eyes at him before dragging that suspicious stare to me.

I pasted on my contrite face. “First of all, I’m sorry for the radio silence during everything that went down the past week. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you it was intense and draining and scary, but that’s not an excuse for my failure to check in.”

She hummed. “It’s not, but despite everything I said, I do understand. You’re used to holding everything close to the vest, and I know what you’re doing is dangerous. But I do want to be… involved.” She swallowed, now looking nervous. “I talked to Carmen and did a lot of thinking this week. I think I do want to… join Knight. But I don’t really have much to offer.”

“Untrue,” I replied with a huff. “But also, on that note, Zach just informed me that your parents have… reached out. They’ve requested a meeting with Knight, given the uncertainty surrounding Ferrero at the moment.”

Mari’s jaw dropped. “They did *not*,” she hissed, indignant. “And they know the *Knight Heir* is my best friend! They’ve done nothing but bitch about your enabling my ‘rebellion.’ *Joder*, I cannot believe those two-faced opportunists!”

Her coffee abandoned on the end table, she hopped to her feet and began pacing again, her incensed muttering alternating between Spanish and English.

“Mari,” I said gently. “This is your first order of business as a member of Knight. You decide the fate of Anzaldua. Welcome your

parents into the Knight fold if they promise to quit their bigoted bullshit. Toss them out to survive on the dregs of Ferrero if they don't. Take the meeting. Don't take the meeting. This is *your* decision."

She paused, looking first at me, then at each of the guys. "Really?"

"Really," Zach replied. "Anzaldua would be a huge get for Knight, but not at the expense of our values." He glanced at me, his smile widening. "Fuck, it feels awesome to have values."

"Sure does," Noah agreed from his spot on the other end of the couch.

"I…," Mari began before she shut her eyes with a pained expression. "I haven't seen them since the holiday break. They've only been getting worse about my relationship with Carmen. And yet, I *still* can't believe they went around me to get to my best friend. Through *Zach*. Ugh." Her eyes popped open, and the fierce girl I knew as my best friend was back. "We'll set the meeting, but let's make them sweat for a while. I can't wait to see their faces when they figure out who holds their fate in her expertly manicured hands."

I let out a sigh of relief, and Bennett squeezed me affectionately.

The road to "good friend" status was going to be a long and bumpy one, but I hoped this was a start.



Our Saturday afternoon was spent in the library, huddled at the end of one of the long study tables. Someone had cleaned the blood off the door to the conference room and the carpet below it, and now students were spread across the cavernous room, whispering, working, and oblivious to the gauntlet that we'd thrown down in here twenty-four hours ago.

I was sitting next to Zach, and Bennett worked on my other side at the head of the table. Mari and Noah took up the seats across from us, and we'd all managed to make headway on the homework we were very behind on after the events of the week.

We were also far enough away from the nearest of our classmates to speak freely while still being out in the open and *seen* by half the student body—because while none of us trusted James Spencer as far as Mari could throw him, we knew the Families' desire to make a giant mess by attacking us around other Academy students was low.

"That's close," Noah said to Mari as he looked over her Chem homework. "But you missed number four and number fifteen."

"*You* try spending most of the semester with Annie as your lab partner," Mari huffed at him. "I know she's not dumb, but that professor-banging skank was not a team player."

I snorted, and even Bennett had lightened up enough these days to crack a smile.

Might've had something to do with the fact that I was currently playing footsie with him under the table, but who could say?

I grinned at Mari. "Did you thank Noah for ridding you of Annie forever?"

She pursed her lips and waved a dismissive hand at me. "Um, no, because he did that for *you*, chica. And I'm certain you've already thanked him in ways he *really* appreciates."

"*Mari*."

Noah's beautiful smile was only the slightest bit smug. "She's not wrong."

"Angel," Bennett rumbled, and Mari visibly swooned just as she had the first time she'd heard Bennett's name for me. He hooked his foot around my ankle, inviting me to tear my heart-eyes away from Noah. Zach was still engrossed in his tablet, but he continued to absently trace patterns on my thigh with his fingertips as he read.

I looked at Bennett. "Hmm?"

"I think we all need to acknowledge that our parents are dropping the pretense of being unwilling to kill you," Bennett said, almost keeping the distress from clouding his face. "You've moved against the Families publicly multiple times, and you've hit them hard enough that even their strongest allies are about to jump ship. They're desperate enough to risk their image now."

Zach grunted in agreement. "Especially because you have us. They made it extremely clear that they think we'll run right back to

them if they can just get rid of you."

None of this was news to me, but I hated to see the strain of worry that had crept onto all three of my boys' faces, not to mention the near panic on Mari's. "I know," I said with a wry grin. "But history shows I'm pretty hard to kill. I'm like a cockroach."

No one found that amusing.

I sighed. "We're prepared for this, guys. I know it's all new to you, but I've known I was going to be in this position for seven long years. We're full steam ahead, and we're going to end it as soon as possible."

"So, what's next, then?" Mari asked tentatively, like she wasn't sure she really wanted to know.

"Well," I began. "Noah's already taken everything worth having from Peter." I beamed a loving smile his way, and he preened. "And Andrea's scrambling. Ferrero makes a lot of its money with guns and muscle, and Zach's cut her off from just about any capable assistance she could hope to procure after we blew a hole in the Ferrero Enforcers."

"Amazing what you can do with a little money and the connections you make being forced to do the Family's dirty work for years," Zach mused, now tucking his hand in between my legs like a deviant.

"But Spencer still stands," Bennett said. "They've lost their major tech VCs to Knight, but my father's empire is still mostly intact. He's plotting."

I twirled my pen between my fingers, wishing it were my knife. "I know. Zepp and Silver are working on something, but I think we need a shot across the bow, like, soon."

"Spencer cares the most about the Family image," Bennett said, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms across his chest. He'd dressed down today in his crew shirt and team joggers, and his corded forearms flexed with the movement—something I could now ogle to my heart's content without a shred of guilt. He clocked where my eyes went, and while his reproachful face said, "Behave," his heated eyes definitely said, "I'm going to fuck your brains out later." I smirked at him, but he forged on. "As the white-collar powerhouse, Spencer has a higher proportion of investors and partners who find

the violence, murder, and underhanded shit… distasteful. They know it exists, but they don't actually want to be publicly associated with it. It may be time to make another huge statement in the press."

"I can help with that," a deep voice purred, and Raiford Montgomery sauntered out of the stacks, raking his hand through his blond coif and flexing a bicep in his polo shirt as he moved.

He grabbed a chair from the table next to us and pulled up a seat at the corner of ours, right smack dab in between Bennett and me. He gave me a lascivious smile, and if my boys' looks could kill, Raif would be dust in the cracks of the hardwood floor right now.

"Is that so?" Mari asked, lightly elbowing Noah as I smothered a snicker.

"Sure," he said, oblivious to how close to death he was walking as he continued to give me his flirty eyes. "I have a proposal for the lovely Knight Heir, if she'll hear me out."

CHAPTER NINE

ZACH



This motherfucker was about to die.

He eyed my Princess up and down like he was imagining her hot, tight body naked, and his cocky fucking smirk said he thought he had an actual shot at making that a reality.

"Let's hear it then, Raif," Jojo replied, reaching between her legs where my grip on her thigh had tightened possessively to give my hand a little squeeze.

I did not loosen my grip.

"Well," he drawled. "First off, I was hoping you were still taking applications for your roster of hot, rich boyfriends? As the City's most powerful Heir, not to mention its most beautiful woman, I really don't think you should be limited."

Nope.

Before I could swipe Jojo's knife from her boot with every intention of climbing over her to stick it right in that asshole's abdomen, Bennett had jumped from his chair, grabbed Raif by the collar of his stupid fucking baby blue polo shirt, and slammed him up against the wall behind our table.

Jojo squirmed in her seat, squeezing her thighs together around my hand. I let out an amused hum, leaning in to whisper in her ear, "Something got you hot, baby girl?"

“Shh,” she hissed, laser-focused on where Bennett was now snarling in Raif’s face.

“Oh, come on, man,” Raif was saying as Bennett wrapped his large hand around Raif’s throat. “The violence is unnecessary, especially in the *library*.”

Noah and I both chuckled at that. Little did he know.

Bennett was unmoved. “You will keep your filthy fucking eyes off her,” he growled. “She is not open for business. She is not some exclusive fucking club you can buy or charm your way into. She’s mine, she’s Noah’s, and she’s Zach's. It has been the four of us since the day she was fucking born, and it will *only* be the four of us until the day we all stop breathing. If I catch you staring at her like she’s your last fucking meal ever again, I will end you. Do you understand me, Montgomery?”

The low moan that Jojo smothered in her throat had my dick twitching in my pants. I met Noah’s amused stare with one of my own.

Finally having Bennett fully *in* this thing with us was both a massive relief and unexpectedly entertaining.

Mari fanned herself dramatically. “Okay, I understand now, chica. Even *I* felt that in my lady parts.”

Jojo let out a pleased sigh. “Right?”

“Okay! Okay! I got it,” Raif muttered, raising his hands in surrender. “I actually do have something to propose that might help Jolie in her… current adversarial position against the Families.”

Bennett glared at him, not moving a muscle, until Jojo finally called him off. “Let him down, Bennett. People are staring, and I think we all know Montgomery Star Media could be useful to us, if that’s where this is going.”

With one last threatening look, Bennett released Raif, who sagged in relief against the wall while Bennett strode back to his seat like nothing at all had happened.

Raif, who’d apparently decided to stop being a dumbfuck, took the open chair next to Noah. He now sat a comfortable distance from our Princess, who just eyed him with a look that said he’d better impress her with whatever he’d come to say.

“Right, well,” he said, swallowing nervously, all that idiotic bravado from earlier vanished. “As you all are aware, my family has kept a very loose affiliation with Ferrero, but we’ve operated as independently as is possible in this City. Obviously, the current state of… unrest within the Families is starting to become public knowledge, and we’re ready to break completely.”

Interesting, and not unexpected. It wouldn’t be a huge loss for my mom because Montgomery hadn’t been that useful to Ferrero to begin with, but every little thing helped in this fight. With a dubious look, I asked, “And what do your parents want in return for Knight’s support in this break from my mom?”

He shrugged. “Honestly? To be left alone. They don’t want to be taken over by Knight or owned in any way, despite the potential… monetary incentives.”

Jolie stared at him in silence. I knew she gave zero fucks about Knight taking over a media company unless it would cause a direct and devastating hit to the Families, but I could see her mind whirling nonetheless. “Knight isn’t interested in owning the whole City, Raif. Tell your parents they’re clear to bail on Andrea, and we’ll back them. But I suspect you have something else you’re offering for this alliance?”

He nodded. “You want to wage war in the press? Every one of our media properties is available to you. Sit for an interview with my mom. Have the Heirs with you, and we’ll run it on every platform we’ve got. The Saint Gabriel Star Today news and culture blog is the most trafficked website on the entire East Coast. My mom has ten million followers on social media. We can help you tell the world anything you want about the Families.”

I looked around the table at my brothers, my girl, and Mari—savvy in her own right in the City’s culture circles—and all of them looked as encouraged as I felt. Given the new information we had about exactly what our parents had been trying to do when they murdered the Knights and the very real evidence Jolie now had her hands on in the form of her dad’s research, this actually had the potential to ruin the Families in the eyes of not just the City, but the entire world.

“Schedule it for tomorrow,” Jolie commanded, not fucking around now. “My people will be in touch.”

Then she stood up, effectively dismissing Raiford—that useful little weasel—and she grabbed her backpack, ready to work.

“Let’s go, team. We have a lot to do before tomorrow.”



I yanked at my collar for the twentieth time since I’d donned my suit earlier this morning.

“I hate playing Heir,” I griped to the room.

“You look sexy, Zach,” Jojo said from her spot in Montgomery Star Media’s hair-and-makeup chair. She dragged her eyes across all three of us where we stood, stiff and on high alert, along the wall of her dressing room. “You all do,” she added with a sultry smile.

“Seconded,” Max quipped from his spot on the opposite wall. Unlike Bennett, Noah, and me, who were all dressed in our finest suits, he got to be here in his tactical gear. “I do love me some rich pretty boys. Big Man fills out that Tom Ford so *deliciously*.”

Bennett sighed irritably, and Noah pouted next to me. “Does he really need to be back here, sweetheart? The three of us are packing, and I know you have your gun strapped to your thigh under that dress.”

She uncrossed and recrossed her legs, and my eyes darted like a heat-seeking missile to the sexy-as-fuck thigh holster she wore under her deep purple dress, her gun just visible through the slit in the fabric. She tutted at us. “I know you guys are plenty deadly. Max is just here for a visible show of muscle. Get along, please.”

“You heard her, Nikko,” Max added with a shit-eating grin.

Noah sighed and banged the back of his head on the wall.

The quiet woman putting the finishing touches on Jojo’s makeup had been fastidiously ignoring all of us like a pro, and it was only her presence that had prevented me from booting Max out into the hall and bending my Princess over the dresser while I showed her other boyfriends how to make our girl scream.

A knock sounded at the door before a polite voice called, “Sound check in five minutes, please.”

The makeup artist released Jojo from her ministrations, and our gorgeous girl unfolded from her chair, smoothing her dress and standing tall on her designer heels. She grinned at us. “Let’s go ruin the Families, shall we?”

Bennett eyed her with that obsessed look of his before he shoved away from the wall, grasped her chin in his hand, and stole a raw, possessive kiss. “You look beautiful, Angel. Don’t hold back out there.”

“Stop it, I’m *swooning*,” Max crooned, and all four of us rolled our eyes at him.

We made our way into the quiet hallway and headed to the spacious, brightly lit studio where Montgomery Star Media conducted its interviews with City VIPs. The Tier One company owned the bottom ten floors in a modern high-rise that sat along the river several blocks to the northeast of Knight Tower. It was quiet today, with only a skeleton crew working on this Sunday for the hastily scheduled interview with the resurrected Knight Heir who was shaking up the City.

I laced my fingers through Jojo’s as we walked, and she hummed happily when I brought her wrist to my lips for a soft kiss. I whispered, “I love you, Princess. I’m so fucking proud of you.”

I was so taken in by that adorable blush that hit her cheeks—the one that only Bennett, Noah, and I could elicit from the stone-cold, badass bitch that was our girl—that I almost missed the weird fucking look the passing janitor had fixed on Jojo.

Just as he made a sudden, jerky move to grab something from the front of his cart of cleaning supplies, I moved.

“Get down!” I shouted, tackling Jojo to the ground just as the janitor ripped a pistol from the cart and fired.

The bullet hit the wall above our heads, and Max and Noah had both already pulled their own weapons and fired in the “janitor’s” direction. He dove behind his cart, wheeling it back down the hall toward the stairwell and shielding his body as he returned fire.

Max, the only one of us wearing a Kevlar vest and a helmet, ran after him. “Go! Get Jojo out of this hallway!”

“Fuck that, I’m going to kill that cowardly little bitch,” Jojo seethed as we rolled to our feet, keeping low.

“Princess, if this was a Family hit, there’ll be more coming,” I said, pushing her along the wall. “Spencer still has quality Enforcers at its disposal.”

“And this gutless bullshit reeks of my father,” Bennett spat as we ran for the studio.

“Incoming!” Max shouted, his heavy boots now pounding behind us. “Hargraves, help me out here.”

Noah whirled, pulling both of his pistols from where he wore them under his suit. A quick glance over my shoulder revealed that the janitor bitch had unlocked the emergency stairwell door, and half a dozen more non-disguised Enforcers had entered the hall.

“Kill the girl. We need the Heirs alive!” one of them shouted as they began to rush forward, weapons raised.

Max laid down cover fire as Noah squared up, taking out two of the invaders with clean headshots right off the bat. The others scattered, and we used the lull to sprint out into the large circular television studio.

We found Lucinda Montgomery, Raif’s mom and legacy Tier One heir to the Montgomery Star Media Empire, cowering behind the plush sofa where she interviewed her guests, her two camera men with her.

“What is going on?” she cried. “Are those gunshots?”

No one answered her, the five of us fanning out into the wide room and readying ourselves for battle.

“Stay down!” Bennett ordered as he flipped the long metal table sitting along the wall onto its side, spilling coffee service and pastries across the floor. “And roll the cameras!”

Bennett ducked behind the table, and Jojo and I were quick to join him. Noah had taken up a post behind the couch opposite Lucinda, and he now had the best sight line to the door. Max was shouting into his earpiece, which meant the fun was really about to start.

I shot my own message to my team, darting a quick look out of the floor-to-ceiling windows of the studio, the midmorning sun giving us a technicolor view of the City streets four floors below. “We’ve got

eyes on the building's entrance," I announced. "In case there's a second wave."

"There will be," Bennett replied, grim, and Jojo just nodded like that was a given.

"Someone fucking leaked," she muttered as she checked her magazine and shoved it back into her gun. "The Montgomerys have a mole."

"A dead one," I grunted.

Just as the Enforcers streamed out of the hall and into the studio, guns blazing, a loud crack sounded, and the glass window behind the couches shattered in an explosion of glass.

Martinez and Rocky flew into the room, abandoning their perch on the window-washing platform outside.

"They really tried it, huh?" Rocky shouted as Martinez and Max managed to tackle two of the Enforcers to the ground. Rocky popped off a shot at another guy who dove out of the way, sliding across the floor and coming to a stop in front of our table.

I kissed my girl's cheek before I said, "I'm taking this one, Princess. Be safe."

Then I vaulted over the table and pounced on the guy as he scrambled for his gun.

Chaos ensued. I made quick work of my captive, and it didn't take much longer for the others to do the same. Jojo dropped the last guy, who'd turned to take aim at me where I crouched over the body of his buddy, with a perfect shot to the head.

"Is that all of them?" she asked as we all stood dusting ourselves off.

"In here, yes," Bennett replied, tucking his firearm away as he made his way over to check on Lucinda and her crew.

Shots rang out from the streets outside, and we realized Noah had disappeared out onto Martinez and Rocky's platform.

I jogged over to stick my head out of the shattered window. "How many are in the second wave?" I shouted at him.

He fired down at the street below. "I got three, and I'm pretty sure Dom got at least five from the patio of the restaurant across the street."

Jolie appeared next to me, surveying the street with a critical eye. She had blood spattered up her arm that was not hers, and her once perfectly curled hair was wild around her gorgeous face. “And Dom thought he was going to get to eat brunch over there undisturbed.”

An ear-splitting scream rang out, and a black-clad body fell from the floor above us, dropping right in front of our window and heading for a very painful end on the pavement below.

“What the—” Jolie began, when another body sailed past us, meeting a similar fate.

I snorted. “Yeah, I figured Frankie might be here somewhere. He’s both always around and never around, somehow.”

She just nodded sagely. “Right.”

Max stuck his head out of the adjacent shattered window. “Got the all-clear. Mrs. Montgomery is freaking out, so you should probably let her know if you still want to do the interview.”

Jojo snorted. “Fuck yeah, I do. The Families sent the cavalry in here to stop me from doing that exact thing. They don’t get to win this one.”

Noah climbed back in through the window, and as his feet hit the studio floor, I turned to press my girl right up against him, her back hitting his chest. He held her tight as I smashed my lips to hers, my adrenaline still pumping and making me horny as fuck. “Go get ’em, Princess. I’ll try not to mount you on that couch in front of everyone, but it’s going to be a fucking test of self-control.”

She moaned as Noah dragged his lips up the column of her pale, delicate neck. “It is such a shame,” he said softly. “You’re so sexy when you’re in warrior mode, and it’s never convenient for us to fuck you afterward like we’re dying to.”

“Ugh, stop it, you two,” she whined, all the while fisting my dress shirt in her wandering little hand and leaning into where Noah nuzzled at her neck. “I have to get my game face on.”

“She’s right. Let her go, you horny fucks,” Bennett groused as he approached. He yanked Jojo away, grasped her face in both hands to lay a greedy kiss on her lips like a hypocritical dick, then led her to the couch.

Then we sat on that couch, all four of us still dirty and bloody from the brazen attack on our girl by the Families, as Jojo told her

story to Lucinda while the cameras rolled.

She reminded the world of what she'd witnessed when she was eleven years old, and this time, the three of us were there to confirm, on the record, that we saw it too.

She described the discovery of her dad's miraculene breakthrough and Anders' confession of the true motive behind the Knights' murder. The wide-eyed, confused look she'd given Lucinda when she asked if Jojo knew the whereabouts of her uncle now was a very nice touch.

Finally, she laid out what she'd done with her dad's research by taking the biggest tech discovery of the decade and essentially giving it away for free to research universities while also starting the largest scholarship program for low-income students in the world.

Bennett, Noah, and I took turns describing the decaying state of our Families, our love for Jolie, and the "horrific attack" we'd suffered only minutes prior to the interview, which Lucinda promised would be spliced together with the footage of Spencer lackeys invading the studio like locusts.

By the end of the hour, the Families looked like despicable, desperate pretenders, while Jolie looked like the righteous angel not to be fucked with that she was.

"Thank you, Miss Knight," Lucinda gushed as we wrapped. "This is going to be a look at the Families that no one has ever been privy to before."

Jolie eyed her coolly, her congenial interview persona now nowhere to be found. "Lucinda, you have a rat in your house. No one outside of my team or yours knew I would be here today and for what reason. However, the Families not only knew, but they were also able to get past your paltry security with a weak disguise. It's unacceptable."

Lucinda gulped. "I…. It couldn't have been one of ours."

"It certainly wasn't one of ours," Bennett replied, and she wilted under his stony glare.

When her eyes darted my way, I gave her my chilliest smirk. "I suggest you find the rat and have him or her delivered to Knight Tower in short order, or we'll let Frankie Fingers comb through the entire company himself."

She paled, nodding mutely.

“Excellent,” Noah said with his bright smile. “It’s been a pleasure, Lucinda. We’ll have our cleanup crew invoice you once they’re finished here.”

With that, we left the studio. I drove us back to the Academy in my Ferrari, Noah and Bennett both declining to ride shotgun so they could wrap themselves around Jojo in my tiny backseat.

No one spoke, and I cast glances in my rearview mirror the entire drive, drawing comfort from the image of them huddled together, my brothers and my girl, as the events of the day finally settled over all of us like the crushing weight they were.

Reality sank into my skin, hardening me from the inside out.

When this whole thing was over, my mom would be dead.

It was the only way I wouldn’t lose my girl again—this time, for good.

CHAPTER TEN

JOLIE



"*We are indeed troubled by the allegations made by Miss Knight, especially given that she has been able to produce the evidence regarding the astounding miraculene research left to her by her father. We are also sickened by the violence perpetrated against her that Montgomery Star Media was able to record. As such, we will be ending our partnership with Spencer, effective immediately*."

I leaned closer to Noah, looking over his shoulder to watch the end of the press conference being held by the largest global investment bank in New York City as it played on his phone. We sat in the back row of our Monday morning Finance class, waiting for the professor to begin his lecture while also pretending we didn't feel the wary stares of almost every student at Holywell on us at all times.

A text popped up on Noah's screen.

Bennett: Spencer stock is tanking

I pulled my phone from my bag to respond in our group chat.

Jojo: good thing I had Zepp invest your trust fund entirely in Knight last week

Noah snorted next to me. "He was ready to refuse every last dime from that trust. He'll thank you later, I hope."

I waggled my eyebrows at him. "Or spank me later, probably."

Noah hummed happily under his breath. “He wishes. You only let me do that, right, sweetheart?”

I felt the flush tinge my cheeks, but I kept it together, leaning in to brush my lips against his ear. “That’s right. I’m only a *good girl* for you, Noah.”

He shut his eyes and let out a low, pained groan.

Zach snickered from my other side. “That wasn’t nice, Princess. It’s been all work and no play around here lately, so the blue balls are really setting in.”

I turned to look at him, arching a brow. “The faster we break the Families down into the tiny, little pieces of garbage they are, the sooner we’ll have unlimited time for you three to just fuck me to your hearts’ content.”

Zach just smirked, those dark eyes full of a *lot* of promising things, before he turned back to his phone and his new partner in crime—Mari, who sat on his other side. They’d been plotting the fates of the various Ferrero cast-offs knocking at Knight’s door, and their blossoming friendship made my heart squeeze a little.

He tossed his phone onto his desktop as he got to chatting with Mari, and it was then that I noticed Zach had set the lock screen to a still shot of me from the attack at Montgomery Star Media. I was standing tall behind the flipped craft services table, my dress torn and my hair askew as I held my Glock high to take out the last remaining Spencer goon. The reminder made me feel powerful while also scaring the shit out of me, because that Enforcer had been about to take a shot at Zach when I’d ended him.

While no one had sustained any major or lasting injuries—including Lucinda, her employees, and the few members of our Shadow team that had been on hand just in case things had gone exactly as they had—it had still been too fucking close.

The low thrum of dread that now beat through my veins was a new development. When I’d started this journey in earnest—the day I’d shoved my grief aside and told Dom that I was going to destroy the Families for what they’d done—I’d numbed myself to anything that wasn’t the mission. I knew the risks, and I accepted them.

But now I had three of the biggest pieces of my heart back, and the thought of losing any of them in this war filled me with pure,

unbridled terror.

I shook those thoughts away, refusing to collapse into an emotional puddle in the middle of Finance class. James Spencer was paying for endangering my boys, and he was about to pay some more.

The class passed quickly when I finally let myself become absorbed in the lecture. When the professor dismissed us at the end of the hour, we packed our shit, unhurried, Mari and Zach still giggling together like schoolgirls and Noah continuing to shoot me heated glances that said he would bend me over his desk at the first available opportunity.

Hell yes.

“Ugh, what?” Mari suddenly spat at a group of students lingering a few rows below us, several of them shooting hateful glares in our direction. “If any of you have a grievance you want to address with the Heirs, I suggest you do it quickly or move along.”

Of course, Chad was at the center of this little group, with Dane Jefferson hanging awkwardly off to the side, and the small flock of Tier Two ass-kissers who ran around with Harper and probably fucked Chad on the regular were there to sneer at us too.

Chad’s beady eyes were hard, and he spoke through gritted teeth. “We don’t have anything to say to *pretenders*.”

Zach’s lazy smile was his most dangerous one. “Careful, Hendrickson. I don’t give a fuck if you insult me, but one word against my girl or Mari and you’ll find yourself having a really bad night tomorrow at Fight Night.”

The girls tittered, and Chad’s eyes widened just a fraction before he scoffed. “Whatever, Ferrero. Once that cunt is put down, all the cowards who fled the Families will end up right back where they were. This little war your bitch started because she’s a hysterical drama queen is only going to end one way.”

I felt Zach vibrating next to me, and Noah had just blown a hard, calming breath through his nostrils.

I knew the feeling—it had taken a mountain of self-control to stop myself from beating the life out of Chad Hendrickson every single day since I’d first stepped foot in Holywell Hall.

Forcing an unaffected smile, I ran a soothing palm down Zach's back while squeezing Noah's hand with my other. "It's okay, guys. Chad's a little sore the feds just came knocking at the Hendrickson manor, aren't you, buddy?"

Chad's square face flushed red all over. "The feds don't fucking scare my father. You should've stayed dead, bitch, because now it's open season." He jerked his head at his groupies, and they trotted after him as he stalked off.

Zach cracked his knuckles. "Tomorrow night's gonna be a fucking bloodbath."

That threatening growl reverberated in my panties. "Can't wait."



"You're calling it 'Operation Perv Sweep'?" Mari asked around a bite of her salad. "Did Zepp name that one?"

"Silver, actually," Noah replied, taking a sip of his second coffee of the day.

Hannah Langford gaped at us. We'd dispensed with the raised table and were back in our usual seats at lunch, so Hannah, John Tyler, Raif, Devin, and a few of Devin's very chill Tier Two buddies had joined us. "You sent the feds after a dozen Spencer-connected families?" Hannah asked, incredulous. "I can't believe the feds finally grew enough balls to even set foot in this City."

I shrugged. "They're feeling braver since Knight invited them here."

Mari's shrewd gaze cut across the aisle to where Chad sat with Harper and their dwindling but vocal group of students loyal to the Families. Harper was comforting Chad, running her one good hand up and down his meaty arm and whispering to him. "No wonder Chad was running his mouth earlier," Mari said. "His daddy might *actually* end up in jail."

Bennett squeezed my thigh under the table, and I grabbed his hand, cradling it in my lap. This little project had been in the works for a while as our first real shot at Spencer, and Bennett had been all

too happy to help bring it home last week after he'd abandoned his Family once and for all.

Over the years, the Shadows had collected information on a group of the City's Spencer-connected elite whose special *predilection* was pornography featuring underage girls and boys. We had a good batch of evidence on Benedict Hendrickson (and by association, Chad) and a few others, and then my venture into James Spencer's safe had yielded his stash of blackmail material on several more Tier One Spencer allies. Once Zepp had downloaded all of this information to Bennett last week, he'd been able to add the rest of the names.

"I wish I'd paid better attention to this shit, Angel," Bennett mused, brooding next to me at the head of the table per his usual. "My father used to bitch about Hendrickson and his little circle of deviants like they were risking the Spencer empire's fake perfect image, but I hadn't known he was talking about a fucking child porn ring."

I began rubbing little soothing circles on his palm with my thumb. "I know, Bennett. There's nothing you could have done, anyway, but you remembered all the names your father has ever complained about in connection with Hendrickson. They're all getting what they deserve because you *were* paying attention."

"Yeah, man," Zach chimed in from his spot on Bennett's other side. "These pedos are about to get ass-fucked by the feds, and Spencer is going to be hard-pressed to stop the bleeding. Not even the most cynical of the greedy Tier Twos is going to want to touch any of these companies now, and your ability to collect and retain your father's bullshit over the years was a huge part in making that happen."

Bennett huffed, but I caught the corners of his lips threatening to turn up in a smile. After years of constantly being called a failure by his father, it would take some time before Bennett would truly believe he was anything but.

I'd remind him at every turn, and so would Zach and Noah.

I floated through the rest of the day on autopilot, still trying to get back into the grind of school after everything that had happened in the past week. I took grim satisfaction in the constant updates from

our team on the downfall of the Spencer white-collar pedophile club, and, despite the rising tensions of this war that we all carried with us now day in and day out, I managed to sleep soundly that night with my boys curled around me.



The next evening, after throwing myself wholeheartedly into crew practice and inhaling my dinner sandwich of choice, Zach diverted me from the walk back to our dorm, pulling me instead toward the gymnasium.

I'd almost forgotten it was Fight Night once again.

"Oh shit, are you fighting tonight?" I asked him as he tugged me through the gym doors and into the basketball arena that was dimly lit and smelled of sweat and Clorox. "Warn a girl, Ferrero. I would've brought a change of panties."

He smirked at me over his shoulder. "You'll see, Princess."

The festivities were well underway. The usual ring of gross, sweaty boys hovering around the thick tumbling mat created the makeshift cage for the fights while the single lamp hanging overhead illuminated the fighters. Dane had his bullhorn and was egging the crowd on as the sound of their bloodlust filled the room, the shouts and jeers echoing off the high gym ceiling.

Bennett and Noah waited for us at the edge of the mat, the other students giving them a wide berth. Noah wore Knight-Tech-branded gym sweats—*where did he get those?*—and his hair was wet and smelled like chlorine, which meant he'd done his swim workout this evening. Bennett had just come from crew, so he was in his usual long-sleeve crew team shirt and my favorite little training shorts that revealed his long, powerful legs.

"You're drooling, sweetheart," Noah said into my ear as he pulled me into his side.

I nuzzled into his neck to take a nice sniff of him, sighing at his familiar clean-laundry scent mingled with the chlorine. "Bennett wears those shorts to torture me. He's been doing it since the night

last semester when he barged into the weight room and shut off my music because he was being a massive dickhead."

Bennett tore his eyes away from where John Tyler was wiping the floor with some B-Dorm out-of-towner. "I shut off your music because hearing one of my dead best friend's favorite songs made me feel like someone was stabbing me in the fucking chest."

I melted a little bit in Noah's arms, and I gave Bennett a slack, moon-eyed stare. I managed to croak, "Oh."

He returned my gawking with a dark look, like I was in trouble for that moment all over again because yes, I *had* deceived them, and yes, I *had* assumed they'd forgotten me like I'd tried to do to them. I wouldn't apologize for the former, but I'd been wrong on all counts on the latter.

Dane interrupted our little stare-off by shouting into his bullhorn, "Winner, John Tyler Ashmore! I know, I know, big shocker for all you regulars here at Holywell Fight Night." He paused to peruse his clipboard, his eyes widening at whatever he saw slated next. "We have a challenge fight on the books for tonight. You all know what that means—the challenged fighter has to accept the fight or forfeit any and all titles from the past year! So, Chad Hendrickson, step into the ring because *you've*. *Been*. *Challeeeeenged*!"

My body vibrated with excitement. I watched Chad march onto the mat with his usual bravado—I knew he wasn't used to losing out here—but there was an air of uneasiness about him.

He'd fucked up, and Zach was about to call him on it.

Dane put his bullhorn to his lips again. "Alright, challenge accepted! Will the challenger please approach?"

I expected Zach to strip and waltz onto the mat. My jaw hit the floor when *Bennett* strode forward, shucking his crew T-shirt as he arrived in his corner.

The entire gym gasped at Bennett's shirtless state, the crowd now taking in his beautifully carved body and the angel wings that stretched across his broad chest, glimmering under the fluorescent bulb that hung above the mat.

"Oh, look at Spencer, publicly declaring how fucking gone he's always been for Jolie Knight," Zach said with a chuckle.

“He’s… he’s never let anyone see his tattoo?” I asked, my eyes glued to Bennett as he gave Chad the stoniest, most dangerous glare I’d ever seen.

Noah grinned next to me. “Only his tattoo artist, Zach, and I had ever seen it. We aren’t sure how he kept it from the crew team, but he always said it was his ‘private fucking business.’ Now look at him. He’s just a lovesick fool, isn’t he?”

It was me who was the lovesick fool. The things I felt for Bennett even back when he was being an obstinate ass had been intense enough—now I worried I was going to implode under the weight of it all.

I sniffed, blinking back the tears that threatened to emerge and ruin my reputation completely. “It’s still hard to believe,” I whispered.

“Believe it, baby girl,” Zach replied. “We’re *all* that fucking gone for you. Now, watch Spencer give Chad what he deserves for the way he’s treated our girl.”

And I did. The usually rowdy crowd was almost subdued, watching in horrified awe as Bennett quickly and efficiently beat the ever-loving fuck out of Chad. It was violent, bloody, and gorgeous. It took both Zach and Noah to finally peel Bennett off his sniveling, almost-unrecognizable opponent long after Dane had called the fight.

And then Zach clutched me tight, my back against his chest in a dark, quiet corner of the locker room, as Bennett held my hips in his bruising grip and fucked me mercilessly, still high on the adrenaline of the fight and drunk on our love—on our *obsession*—all while Noah guarded the door and praised me for taking Bennett so fucking good.

That night, I slept like the dead.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NOAH



"Thanks, Silver. Just keep an eye on him, and I'll let you know if we decide to make any additional moves."

"On it. Stay safe, sir." She signed off, and I locked the screen of my phone before tossing it onto the surface of my desk.

I removed my glasses to pinch my brow like that would stave off the oncoming headache that was dealing with my father. He'd done exactly what I'd known he would the second he realized I'd truly taken everything from him: he cashed out his personal accounts and anything he could still get his hands on at what was left of Hargraves, and he disappeared.

And now I had to decide if that was enough.

But it wasn't really up to me.

"Knock, knock."

Normally, a student arriving in the final thirty minutes of my Friday afternoon office hours would be mildly annoying, but I knew that voice and welcomed the interruption.

Jojo stepped into my office, locking the door behind her. When I glanced her way, I froze for several long seconds as every blood cell in my body rushed straight to my dick.

"Professor Hargraves?" she said, biting her lush lower lip and giving me a wide-eyed, innocent stare. "I was hoping we could chat for a minute. It's about my… grades."

She slinked forward, and I ran my greedy gaze over her silky white blouse, the black bra I could see through its sheer material, her tiny little navy skirt, her thigh-high white stockings, and her shiny black high heels that I knew had to have been borrowed from Mari. She'd braided her white-blonde hair into two pigtails and painted her lips a glossy pink, which matched the adorable flush in her freckled cheeks.

I needed to pull myself together—because if this was going where I prayed to every version of God ever worshiped by humans it was, all of my fantasies were about to come true.

I schooled my features into something more serious, motioning to the chair in front of my desk. "Have a seat, Miss Knight."

She sat primly, crossing her miles-long legs so that her skirt rode up to the very tops of her silky, toned thighs. She worried at the hem of her skirt, affecting a nervous look, before she said, "I'm just concerned about my grade in Advanced Computer Science, Professor. We're already so far into the semester, and I'm struggling *so* much. It's not that you aren't an *amazing* teacher, but I am really in need of some…" She bit her lip again, giving me a coy glance from under her long lashes. "… *extra credit*."

I leaned back in my chair, steepling my fingers under my chin as I gave her a scrutinizing stare, all the while trying desperately to ignore the raging hard-on I was sporting under my desk. "And what do you propose to do to earn this extra credit, Miss Knight?"

She hummed, now twirling one of her braids around a finger. "Well, I may not be very good with computers"—a ridiculous lie, reminding me I was still sore about her deliberately flopping in my class last semester—"but I do have… *other* skills. Ones I'm trying very hard to improve upon."

At her hopeful, doe-eyed look, I adjusted myself in my slacks before I stood from my chair, then I stalked slowly around to the front of my desk. I crossed my arms over my chest as I leaned back against the desktop, studying her intently.

She blushed, casting her gaze to the floor like she was nervous. I knew she was acting—my girl didn't avert her eyes for *anyone*—but that telltale flush that graced her cheeks was genuine. I realized she

might actually be a little nervous to play this part for me, especially for the very first time.

The thought made me even harder.

I leaned forward, grasping her chin between my thumb and forefinger as I forced her eyes back to mine. “Are you going to do whatever I ask you to do here in this office, sweet girl?”

Her pupils dilated, and she nodded slowly.

“Good girl,” I rumbled, and I swore her thighs clenched, shooting dopamine straight through my entire body. “As long as you follow my instructions and try very hard—if you give it your *very* best effort—you’ll be able to earn your extra credit.”

She nodded again, this time eagerly. “Yes, Professor.”

I stroked a gentle hand over her cheek, then I said, “On your knees, please, sweetheart.”

She lowered gingerly to the ground, her icy blue eyes never leaving mine, before asking in a breathy voice, “What would you like me to do for you, Professor?”

Fuck me, this was heaven. My beautiful, powerful girl on her knees for me, looking so desperate—so *hungry*—to please me.

Keep it together, Hargraves.

“Unzip my pants,” I commanded, keeping my tone gentle but authoritative. She did as I asked, first unbuckling my belt with her nimble fingers before getting my slacks unbuttoned with the singular focus of a woman on a mission. She ran a hand over the bulge in my boxers, and I grabbed her wrist, stilling her. “Do you want my cock, sweet girl?”

She peered up at me, the corner of her lips threatening to tip up into a smirk before she wiped it away, replacing it with a supplicating look. “Yes, please, Professor. I want your cock very much.”

“And where do you want it?”

She licked her lips, and I bit back a groan. “In my mouth.”

I beamed my biggest smile down at her so she’d know how perfect she was, then I pulled my straining dick from my boxers, giving it a few light pumps for her. “Okay, sweetheart. How much do you want that extra credit? Show me how hard you’re willing to work to succeed in my class.”

She wrapped her hand around my dick, stroking it lovingly before she licked me from balls to tip like I was an ice cream cone. “Your dick is gorgeous, Professor.”

“Then show me how much you want it,” I demanded.

And she did. The first time she’d gone down on me when I’d shared her with Zach had been fantastic, but this was transcendent. I had all her focus, as she had mine, and I watched in awe as she swallowed me down. I’d never beheld a more beautiful sight than those wide aquamarine eyes on mine and those pink lips wrapped around my cock as she sucked and bobbed with an easy finesse.

“You’re doing so, so good, sweet girl,” I rasped, my voice cracking under the strain of holding myself back.

She released me with a low, pleased hum, giving me a few more licks while she stroked me. “Am I? I’m trying *so* hard for you, Professor.”

Damn it. I pulled my dick from her grasp before I yanked her to her feet.

“Noah!” she squealed in surprise as I lifted her into the air, cradling her ass in my hands as she wrapped her legs around my waist. I carried her around to the back of my desk, shoving my laptop off to the side before I laid her gently down on the surface. I stood between her legs where they hung off the desk, her ass right at the edge where I wanted it.

I flipped her skirt up, exposing her glistening pussy, then I slapped my palm against her firm ass, the crack of flesh meeting flesh echoing off the walls of my quiet office. “No panties, Miss Knight? That’s very naughty.”

Her breathing became labored as I began to unbutton her blouse. “I was really hoping to get an A, sir.”

I chuckled. “Were you hoping I’d fuck this hungry little pussy too?”

She squeezed her eyes closed and moaned. “Yes, Professor.”

I managed to get her blouse open, exposing her perfect tits encased in black lace. I ripped the cups down and wrapped my lips around her beaded nipple, giving it a quick suck and a nibble before I switched breasts. She ran her fingers through my hair, humming

appreciatively as I worked, and I loved the feeling so much that I decided not to demand that she keep her hands on the desk—yet.

I ran two fingers through her folds to find her soaking, and I groaned before I released her nipple and began my journey south. “You know, I think I will fuck this perfect pussy, sweetheart,” I said, kissing down the taut hollow of her belly. “But I can’t resist a taste first. Would you like that?”

“Fuck yes,” she replied, her words breathy and eager.

I pulled up my chair and got comfortable, giving her another firm swat on the side of her ass. “Language, Miss Knight.”

She snorted, and I suppressed my own laugh. My sweet Jojo now cussed like a sailor—just another way she fit so perfectly with Bennett, Zach, and me.

“I’m sorry, Professor. I’m just so… excited to feel your tongue in my pussy. Sir.”

I groaned, issuing one more quick slap to her ass as I muttered, “Playing dirty, I see.”

Then I tossed her legs over my shoulders and dove in. I’d watched both Zach and Bennett go down on her in the weeks since that first time she and I had finally made love, and while it had been pretty damn satisfying for me, it was nothing compared to the real thing.

I ran my tongue through her center with some long, slow licks, and she squirmed on my face. I wrapped my hands around her thighs, locking her in place, then I gorged on her like a man possessed, reveling in her sweet taste and even sweeter moans.

“*Noah*,” she gasped as I worked her clit the way all three of us knew she loved.

I turned my head to sink my teeth into her inner thigh, and she hissed. “Is that what you call me, sweetheart?”

“No, Professor,” she whimpered.

“That’s better. I want you to come for me now, sweet girl. Give me one gorgeous orgasm, and then I’ll fuck you just like you want me to.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chanted in a strained whisper. “Please.”

I sucked her clit back into my mouth, lashing it with my tongue while driving two fingers into her with hard, firm strokes until she

contracted around me and screamed.

“Noah!” she cried, and I wasn’t going to stop even for a second to admonish her for using my name because my girl screaming it while she came was the greatest sound in the entire world.

I licked her a few more times as she came down, then I rose to my feet to stare down at her—flushed, her bare tits rising and falling with her panting breaths, and those big eyes hooded with satiated lust.

My tenuous hold on my control snapped.

I leaned down to smash my lips to hers, taking one raw, bruising kiss before I gathered her hands in my fist and jerked them over the top of her head. I held her still as I guided my aching cock into her, slamming home in one long, hard thrust, and we both moaned together. Her back arched and her eyes shut, and I held her down beneath me as I pounded into her—so tight, so wet, so *divine*.

And so mine.

“Look at you, sweetheart,” I said, my voice low and thick as I fucked her. “Spread out on my desk, taking my cock like you were born to do it. You’ve been so good for me. So, so good.”

“Oh God, Noah,” she whined. “Fuck, it’s so good. I’m so close.”

“Yeah? Am I giving you what you wanted? Did you want me to put you on my desk, hold you down, and fuck you until you forgot your name? Is that why you pranced into my office in a tiny skirt wearing no panties?”

“Yes!”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Professor!”

God, I was going to lose it. This was everything I’d ever wanted, and it was with my Jojo—our angel, the girl we loved and lost who I sometimes still couldn’t believe was real.

But she *was* real. I had my hands on her skin and my cock inside her body, and she was tightening under me now in a way that had my head spinning.

“Oh, Noah, I’m coming,” she wailed.

“Good girl,” I managed to croak as I exploded with her, burying my head in the crook of her neck as I fucked her through her climax, my own hitting me like a Mack truck as I fought to stay standing.

I released her hands, and she went straight to running her fingers through my hair again. I purred like a cat, nuzzling into her neck, and when the feeling returned to my legs, I pulled out of her and made quick work of cleaning her up with the tissues stashed in my top desk drawer.

We righted our clothes, then I pulled her into my lap as I sat down in my chair, cradling her like the priceless treasure she was.

“That,” I said, blowing out a breath, “was a dream come true. Wow.”

She grinned, her eyes lit up with pride. “Yeah? I took a chance that this kind of thing might be up your alley.”

I kissed her. “It was fucking fantastic. Thank you, sweetheart.”

She snuggled into me. “I know it’s been a while since it was just you and me, Noah. I’m sorry it’s been so… busy around here.”

“Jojo,” I said, squeezing her tight. “Please don’t worry about that. I know you must feel pressure to make sure you’re giving each of us enough attention, but I promise we’re all okay. It’s not a competition, and we can all feel how deeply you care for us. Plus….” I paused to waggle my eyebrows at her with a big smile. “I think we’ve each discovered we are very into *watching*.”

She punched me playfully in the bicep. “I’ve noticed. Pervy voyeurs, all three of you.”

We sat in comfortable silence, the clock on the wall ticking down the last few minutes of my scheduled office hours, after which I would officially be on spring break.

“Hey, Noah,” she murmured.

“Yes, Jojo?”

“I love you. I have since I was a little girl, and now I love you the way a woman loves a man she knows she can’t live without. And I want to make sure you know that just because I said it to Zach and Bennett first doesn’t mean I loved them sooner or harder.”

I kissed her again, slow and sweet, my heart bursting at the seams. “I love you, too, sweetheart. I might’ve fallen a little bit in love with you even when you were Joanna Miller, but I think I knew the second your eyes hit mine at the Holiday Ball that I was a goner. Even though we had to… work through a few things to get there.”

She chuckled. “You’re never going to get over my faking it in your class last semester, are you?”

I growled. “I should’ve spanked you more.”

“I’m sure you’ll find another opportunity to punish me for being such a bad girl.”

I shivered. “You better believe it.” Another minute of easy silence stretched between us, and I knew I needed to have a more serious discussion with her while we had this moment together. I took a breath, then I said, “Sweetheart, I need to talk to you about my dad.”

She turned her head to look up at me from where she was curled up in my lap. “Did you find him?”

I nodded. “It wasn’t hard. He’s in Thailand. Paid cash for a beach mansion and appears to be content to hide away and live on the few millions he was able to abscond with.”

“Ah.” Her brow furrowed as she contemplated how she felt about that.

I brought my hand to her cheek, staring deep into those mesmerizing eyes. “Listen to me, Jojo. This is your decision. I will keep an eye on him while you and I make what used to be Hargraves great in the name of your parents. Or I will fucking end him.”

She stared into my eyes, the intense, calculating woman she was when it came to avenging her parents appearing before me. “Peter participated in my parents’ murder. He signed the document sealing their fate, and he forced his twelve-year-old son to watch that depraved act of violence. And yet….” She blew out a breath. “He didn’t pull the trigger. I sincerely doubt any of it was his idea, and he probably went along with it to save his own ass.”

“I would agree, but I’m his son. I’m biased, in spite of everything.”

She leaned forward to give me a quick kiss. “I don’t need him to die, Noah. I need to take everything from him, which you’ve already done for me because you’re amazing, and I need to never see his face again. We have bigger fish to fry.”

I hated that I felt the tiniest bit of relief at her words, but it was what it was—I was still his son, and he was still my dad.

I despised him for what he did, but it would’ve been difficult for me to kill him.

The clock struck five. “I love you, Jojo,” I said. “Let’s get the other two and go home, yeah?”

She beamed at me. “Yes, let’s. And I love you too.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

JOLIE



"Home" was now my Family's penthouse in Knight Tower, wiped free of any trace of my traitorous uncle and tastefully redecorated in a way that suited the modern young woman and her three live-in boyfriends.

Bennett had ensured the Knight penthouse became a proper home for us as a part of his various projects over the past week, and it was a tough call for me as to whether this extremely thoughtful gesture or his pounding Chad into a bloody purple pulp had turned me on more.

I woke Saturday morning in my new giant bed in the primary bedroom, the space around me where the guys had slept warm but empty.

My feet hit the floor—the carpet of my parents' spacious room had been replaced with dark hardwood in the Anders era. The designer Bennett hired had redecorated the room with soft grays and even softer pinks, and the rug under my feet displayed intricate floral designs in those colors. There was a new white dresser, a matching chest of drawers, and the attached sitting room now sported a brand-new squishy gray couch, a pink armchair, and a moderately sized flat-screen TV mounted over the fireplace.

The en suite bathroom had also changed dramatically from when it had been my parents'—my mom's beige tile and colorful accent

borders were now a clean, gleaming white. A clawfoot tub replaced the old jacuzzi, and Bennett's designer had ensured there were towels, rugs, and even shiny new chrome plumbing fixtures that had never been touched by the treasonous hands of my uncle.

After I freshened up and threw on some dark leggings and a cropped long-sleeved shirt, I padded down the hall, past the spare bedrooms that had each been redone and assigned to Zach, Noah, and Bennett. Anything they'd been able to salvage from their rooms at their respective Family homes had made its way here, and Bennett's army of personal shoppers had filled in the gaps. Each of my boys had a tasteful, masculine space to call his own, and I couldn't wait to defile each of their beds on the rare occasion we didn't all pile into mine.

I glanced toward the other end of the hall before I turned to head down the stairs, catching a quick glimpse of my dad's study through the open door. Noah's team had thoroughly searched it for anything else incriminating Anders might have left behind—finding nothing of note—before Bennett's team had cleared the old office furniture and created two mega desks that were built into the side walls, each with two workstations. Now all four of us had a space to study, run the Knight empire, or plot James' and Andrea's ruin.

I trotted down the stairs, and I heard the low murmurs of voices in the kitchen. The renovations done after my parents' deaths had changed the main living area quite a bit, replacing marble tile with hardwood, opening the formal dining room to the new white kitchen with updated appliances and gunmetal gray backsplash. Bennett's team had delivered new furniture for the living room: comfy couches, richly colored rugs and throw pillows, and a giant flat-screen television connected to every kind of gaming console known to man. Gleaming glass doors looked out onto our pool deck where I could see that even the lounge chairs were brand-new.

I loved it all. There were still hints of home here, and I tried very hard to channel that feeling into only the good memories of my parents or the time spent here with the boys growing up. But now it also felt like a fresh space for us to make new memories in as a family.

“Morning, Princess!” Zach called as I trudged sleepily into the kitchen, allowing the smell of fresh coffee to be my guide.

“Hi, guys.” I looked around the room and found Zach behind the stove, meticulously pouring pancake batter onto a griddle, shirtless, wearing only an apron and his pajama pants. Noah sat at the dining room table, sipping coffee and typing on his laptop, his blond hair a little rumpled and his eyes focused behind his dark frames. Bennett lounged in a chair next to him, lazily scrolling his phone and drinking something that looked suspiciously like green juice.

“What’s up, boss lady?”

I startled, suddenly noticing Rocky sitting at the large kitchen island. He drank his own mug of coffee while doing something on his tablet, his massive shoulders hunched over the counter and his shaved head gleaming under the bright kitchen lights.

“Rocky,” I said with a narrow-eyed stare. “Fancy meeting you here.”

He grinned at me. “Just stopping by. We’re all organized downstairs now, and I’m on the morning ‘make sure the boss is alive’ rotation.”

“Ah-ha,” I replied, moseying over to the kitchen after getting a quick good-morning kiss from both Bennett and Noah. “Well, as you can see, I am still kicking. All is quiet in the Knight penthouse.”

“For now,” he said with a wink. “And my man Ferrero is making some awesome-smelling pancakes.”

Zach huffed. “Don’t mind him, Princess. He can’t take a hint and has invited himself to breakfast.”

I kissed Zach’s cheek before I poured myself a cup of hot, delicious coffee. “It’s fine. I could use a status report, anyway.” I shot Rocky a pointed look and waved a hand at him. “Make yourself useful, my friend.”

He gave me a brisk little salute, took a sip of his coffee, and began his report. “The three floors below us here in the penthouse are now your security command center, a mix of the Shadows who’ve decided to officially join the Knight organization and legacy Knight Enforcers who worked for your parents and whom we’ve thoroughly vetted. We’ve also picked up a team from Hargraves who apparently had loyalties only to your boy over there.”

I glanced at Noah, who just nodded as he continued typing away on his laptop. “They’re solid. Silver keeps an eye on them, anyway.”

Rocky continued, “And Ferrero here has engaged every independent security firm in the City to fill in the gaps, so we’ve got them on rotation here, around the Academy, and at Hargraves Tower as it’s being remodeled.”

“And most importantly,” Zach added, “we’ve prevented them from being hired by James Spencer or my mom.”

Rocky nodded. “Yep. And we’re essentially paying all the black-market merc groups just to stay away at the moment. Andrea is having trouble staffing her dirty fights and finding someone willing to take on the runs for whatever she’s smuggling these days.”

Zach began plating our pancakes. “It’s still guns and priceless, stolen artifacts that rich people think need to be on display in their homes and not a museum, as far as I know,” he said.

“And everyone’s moved in downstairs who wanted a spot?” I asked Rocky.

“Yep. Anyone on the team who wanted an apartment has one in the residence hall two floors below us. The gym and training center are also all set up, and we have a mini command center that links to Silver down on floor twenty-seven. And we, uh… gave the residence hall’s corner suite to Frankie Fingers.”

I felt my eyebrows hit my hairline. “Frankie lives here?”

Zach slid a plate of pancakes in front of Rocky before glancing at me. “Where else would he live, Princess? He’s head of our personal security now.”

Rocky shivered. “He’s, like, the nicest guy, and yet somehow he also scares the fuck out of me.”

“Join the club,” Bennett muttered.

I climbed onto the barstool next to Rocky and dove immediately into my own plate of pancakes. Zach delivered plates to Bennett and Noah before hopping up on the stool next to me. I continued to pepper Rocky with questions as we ate.

“How’s morale in the big Family businesses?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Low for the ones that are failing, obviously, but everything Knight has been able to snag a controlling piece of is

generally in good shape, especially since you guys raised everyone's pay by… a lot."

We were certainly doing what we could to give the working people who were the actual backbone of the City a better life, starting with a living wage, benefits, and access to affordable childcare.

Zach hummed in thought. "I really need to check in on everyone at the Club. It's just been so fucking busy."

Rocky grunted. "Club's fine, man. Andrea would never let her pride and joy fail. And anyway, Knight bought up the shares of the Club sold by all the bailing investors, so everyone's still got a job."

I smiled, nudging Zach with my elbow. "Actually, the Club is now fifty-percent owned by Zach Ferrero."

Zach jerked his head to look at me with wide eyes. "What?"

"I know you care about that place and the people in it," I replied, shoving a bite of pancake into my mouth. "So, Knight gifted you its shares."

That cocky, sexy smile appeared on his face, and he pulled me in for a very syrupy kiss. "You're amazing, baby girl. Thank you."

Rocky finished up his breakfast, drained the last of his coffee from his mug, and hopped to his booted feet. "Alright, team. Back to the grind of holding down this fortress and looking for ways to ruin our evil overlords."

I snorted. "Bye, Rocky. Dom says he wants you down at the gym on your next day off to put the fear of God into his middle-school group."

Rocky gave me a toothy grin as he cracked his knuckles. "Those kids *are* some little mouthy shits. Tell him I'll be there Wednesday."

He ambled out of the kitchen, and a few moments later, the ding of the elevator arriving out in the foyer announced his departure from the penthouse.

Zach watched him go with a furrowed brow. "Those assholes better not think this is a revolving door up here. I will not have one of them just *popping in* while I have Princess bent over the dining room table, screaming my name."

"Only if they want to have their eyeballs torn out of their head," Bennett said.

“Word,” Noah added.

So, it seemed we were all still *settling into* Knight Tower.



Later that afternoon, we were lounging together in the living room as we finished up our lingering homework, the boys having traded their pajamas for their daytime sweats. College basketball played on our huge TV with the volume turned low.

I had my head in Noah’s lap and my bare feet in Zach’s as we sprawled across our huge plush couch. Bennett lazed in the oversized armchair next to us, his long legs crossed as he read a novel for his Lit Seminar.

I’d just finished up my Chem homework when Noah let out a big sigh. “I can’t believe we’re back here,” he said with a quiet reverence. “On Jolie’s couch, doing our homework, watching basketball. Just being together like we always were on the weekends. It feels like I’m dreaming.”

I reached up to caress his cheek. “I know. If this is a dream, I don’t ever want to wake up. And also, this is *our* couch. It belongs to each of you as much as it does to me, just like the whole penthouse does.”

Bennett looked up from his novel, his intent stare caressing the length of my body. “Do you like it, Angel? I know it’s probably hard to be here again after everything. If you don’t like something, just say the word, and I’ll have them up here to change it *today*. I want you to love it.”

My heart squeezed, and I rolled off Noah and Zach to climb into Bennett’s lap. He grinned, tossing his book to the side as I straddled him, cradling his face in my hands and looking into those beautiful mossy eyes.

“I do love it, Bennett,” I whispered. “So much. I don’t think I can say thank you enough for turning this place into our home. Change nothing—I love it all because it came from *you*.”

I leaned down to press my lips to his, and he wrapped his big hands around my ass, pulling me in tight and deepening the kiss

immediately. I groaned as his huge dick began to harden underneath me.

“Oh shit,” Zach said, sounding excited. “Are we gonna watch Jojo take that monster again? You better share this time, asshole.”

Bennett ignored him, moving one hand from my ass and dragging his rough fingers lightly under my shirt and up my belly, stopping to play at the seam of my flimsy bralette, when the loud ding of the elevator echoed out in the foyer, announcing the arrival of a visitor.

“Attention! Brother entering the house!” Max’s deep voice reverberated through the room. “If there is a four-way fuck-fest going on in here, it needs to be *wrapping up!*”

Bennett pulled his lips from mine and buried his face in my shoulder with a frustrated groan.

“That dick,” Zach groused as the tromping of Max’s boots on the wood floors neared.

Noah also appeared sour. “Does he really *need* full access to the penthouse, sweetheart?”

Bennett flipped me around to cradle me in his lap, ostensibly for more innocent-looking snuggling, but I was aware that I was also hiding his hard-on from our visitor.

“Hey, team,” Max said with a cheeky grin as he breezed into the living room. He wore a tight black Henley, ripped gray jeans, and his dark boots. His hair was tied in its usual messy knot on the back of his head, and he had his backpack that no doubt contained his assortment of weapons and electronics. His dark eyes swept over the large living room, and he whistled. “Damn, this place is killer. Thanks for inviting me to hang out, Jojo.”

“Anytime, Maxy,” I replied, ignoring the grumbling from my boys. “There’s a two-bed, two-bath guest suite down the hall just off the foyer, so that’s for you, Dom, and Laura when you want to stay here.”

I squeezed Bennett’s hand, reminding him that he was the one who had made sure those rooms were ready for just that purpose. He knew I’d want Max to have a place here, and he made it happen, despite the fact that Max had made it his mission in life to annoy the shit out of the guys.

“Sweet,” Max replied. “But Mari’s my roommate this week, right?”

“Yep.” She’d stayed at the Academy last night but would be spending the week here once she finished packing her entire wardrobe. I gave Max a squinty-eyed glare. “Do *not* take her downstairs to the security floors. There are too many young, horny assholes on our new Enforcer team, and they will not care that she isn’t into dick. It’s Camp Testosterone down there.”

He scoffed, waving a dismissive hand at me. “Mari can take care of herself.”

Zach leaned forward on the couch, resting his elbows on his knees and spearing me with a dark look. “Speaking from experience, Princess?”

Max chuckled at that. “Like you three dickheads don’t know e*xactly* how Joanna Miller could turn the heads of just about anyone that crossed her path who’s into chicks.”

“*Max*,” I groaned.

“They know I speak the truth, Jojo. They were *so* confused by their pants-feelings for that unruly scholarship girl from the Southside.”

Zach relaxed, Noah’s amused smile returned, and even Bennett let out a wry chuckle.

Ah, memories.

“We sure were,” Zach admitted with a shrug while Bennett pressed a lingering kiss into the crook of my neck. Zach went on, “Our girl is fucking fire. Good thing she only burns for us.”

Max winked at me, his teasing smile softening into one of deep affection.

He was thrilled I’d found them again, and he saw how hard they loved me.

“I’m going exploring,” he announced, turning to wander away. “Be back in a little bit!”

After we could no longer hear the stomping of his boots, I turned to the boys. “I love him, but not in even remotely the same way I love you three. Co-exist peacefully, please.”

Noah beamed his loving smile my way before he rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Honestly, what pisses me off the most is that even in spite of everything, he’s still so goddamn likable.”

I nodded sagely. “That charisma is unmatched.”

And then the elevator dinged again.
Zach groaned. “Ugh, what now?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JOLIE



"Honey, I'm home!"

This time it was Mari's voice that floated in from the entryway, the sounds of her suitcase rolling along the wood floor following immediately.

"Does literally everyone we know have access to this place, Princess?" Zach asked. "Not that I mind Mari being here, but security is kind of important given the… position we find ourselves in these days."

I frowned. "Actually, Mari's fingerprint isn't keyed to the penthouse. She was supposed to text me when she got to the lobby."

"This place is amazing!" Mari raved as she waltzed into the living room.

All four of us froze, eyes wide, as we realized Mari had brought a friend with her.

Frankie grinned like a maniac at us. "Love the new digs, Little Knight."

Mari had her hand looped through the crook of Frankie's elbow as he escorted her further into the room, both of them clutching brightly colored drinks speared with fat straws.

"Um, Mari," I began, darting a *what the fuck?* glance over at Zach, who just shrugged helplessly. "What's, uh… what's going on

here?”

“Oh, I met Francisco in the lobby when I came by earlier!” she gushed. “We decided to go get our nails done, and then we went for boba tea. You guys didn’t tell me Zach had such an adorable *young* uncle.”

Frankie preened, waving his drink-holding hand at us, his dark purple nails a stark contrast to the neon orange boba tea. “I hadn’t had the chance to make Miss Mari’s acquaintance yet, so we decided to get to know each other. I’m responsible for her safety when she’s staying here with my other charges, after all.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, slowly.

“Sorry I didn’t text you, but Francisco said he could bring me to the penthouse,” Mari went on. “*Joder*, look at the pool!”

She released Frankie’s elbow and trotted over to the tall French doors that lead to the pool deck, her flowy pink playsuit swishing around her legs and her espadrilles clomping against the floors as she went.

Noah watched her over his shoulder as she breezed out onto the patio, then he turned back to the rest of us. “So, should we tell her, or…?”

Frankie rolled his eyes, his wide smile never faltering. “You guys act like I can’t have friends.”

Zach’s dark stare turned suspicious. “Since when do you have friends, *Francisco?*”

He shrugged lazily, taking a big swig through his straw. “Sometimes I like to try new things.”

Mari returned from her tour of the pool deck, and instead of dropping into the open spot on the couch I’d vacated for Bennett’s lap or the other empty armchair, she trotted back over to Frankie’s side and clutched his arm again. He offered her a sip of his tea, which she accepted with a gracious smile.

“Just keep calm, Angel,” Bennett muttered into my ear. “We don’t want to startle either of them.”

Right on cue, Max sauntered back into the living room. “Fuck, Jojo, this place is great. Your orgy-sized bed is a nice touch—”

He froze as he noticed our visitors. I watched his dark gaze heat as it landed on Frankie, drinking him in with such enthusiasm that I

wrinkled my nose—some things a sister really just didn't need to see *that* up close and personal from her brother—but then his eyes widened in surprise before they *quickly* narrowed as he noticed Mari clinging to Frankie's arm.

"Max, mi amor!" Mari exclaimed. "I didn't know you were already here."

Frankie had also appeared taken aback to run into Max at this exact moment, his big smile morphing into a glower in Max's direction. But the second Max's salacious perusal of Frankie turned into guarded suspicion regarding Mari, a smug little grin crept back onto Frankie's striking face.

"Miss Mari, who's your friend?" he asked lightly, then he eyed Max with a challenging stare as he sucked hard on his straw. "I sure hope you haven't replaced me already."

Max scowled, marching toward them to pluck Mari out of Frankie's clutches, pulling her into a hug that she accepted with enthusiasm. They did the double cheek-kiss thing, and Max stared Frankie down the entire time.

The boys and I just watched this whole thing unfold in uncomfortable silence.

"Maxy, have you met Zach's uncle?" Mari asked brightly, turning in Max's arms to gesture to Frankie. She tossed a really unsubtle elbow into Max's ribs as she stage-whispered, "He's pretty cute, no?"

"Very," Max purred. "But, babe, I'm a little confused as to how you happen to know the bloodiest, most notorious Family Enforcer in the entire City?"

She gasped, turning back to Frankie. She swatted him playfully on the bicep, and the rest of us winced in unison. "Francisco! Is this true?"

Frankie shrugged. "I do have a bit of a reputation. But that's all nasty business—definitely not appropriate conversation for our delightful afternoon together."

Max shook his head, like he wasn't sure he'd heard that right. "Mari, you spent the afternoon with Frankie Fingers?"

"Frankie who?"

We were all saved by the loud buzzing of Frankie's phone. He pulled it from the back pocket of his ridiculously tight acid-washed

jeans and put it to his ear. “Yeah?” A slow smirk spread across his face. “Oh, that is excellent news. We will meet you in the workroom.”

I slid from Bennett’s lap and onto my feet, my back straight and my game face on. “Whose day are we about to ruin?” I asked Frankie as he shoved his phone back into his pocket.

He looked giddy, all the weird bullshit he and Max continued to have between them momentarily forgotten. “The Montgomerys have delivered their rat.”



Bennett squeezed my hand. “Are you sure you’re okay being back down here, Angel?”

I nodded, feeling resolute. “I know some traumatic things happened to me down here, Bennett, but some amazing things did too. Plus, this is where Knight will be… taking care of certain business. I’m not going to just hang out up in my ivory tower and not get my hands dirty alongside my team.”

Frankie tossed an amused smile over his shoulder. “Ah, Little Knight, as much as I’d love to take care of all of these things for you, I do find that position so very respectable. I knew as soon as I caught you on the roof of Spencer Tower that you were something different.”

Mari gasped from behind me where she was being led into the lion’s den by Max. “Francisco is the one from the Spencer Tower heist?”

She’d insisted on accompanying the group down to Knight Tower’s basement “workroom.” It was just as well, since Max had pouted when I demanded he stay behind to watch her, and none of my boys were keen on being left out, either, so here we all were, filing into the bleak, cold basement behind Frankie.

Max grunted, answering her question. “Yep.”

“Francisco!” Mari barked. “You *shot* at my best friends!”

Frankie turned to give her a guilty little smile. “I wasn’t trying to kill them, Miss Mari. If had been, they’d both be dead.”

Chilling, but true.

We entered the barren floor of the basement to find Kara and Julie—married couple, two of the most badass ladies I knew, and longstanding members of the Shadows—keeping guard over a lone prisoner. I could tell by the delicate frame of our captive that this was a woman, her spindly arms wrenched tight and bound to the chair behind her. She wore wide-legged denim jeans and a fitted black sweater, and there was barely a smudge on her expensive heeled booties. Her perfectly contoured face was defiant and flushed with rage.

As we stepped into the low light of the single overhead bulb, I realized I recognized her. “That’s the fucking makeup artist from the Montgomery Star Media studio,” I said, disgusted and just a little pissed off that I’d let this woman touch my face.

“Ah, I see,” Kara replied, her defined arms crossed over her chest and her narrow-eyed stare still on the captive. “She’s been extremely tight-lipped since they dropped her on our doorstep ten minutes ago.” She glanced up at the group of us as we all fanned out around them, and she chuckled. “I see you brought the whole gang, Jojo.”

I grinned, shrugging. “Can’t let Frankie have all the fun.”

“Aw, come on, Little Knight,” Frankie said with a playful whine. He began circling the prisoner like a shark, and the determined set of her jaw wavered at his manic smile.

Kara’s grim look softened as her eyes landed on Noah. “Hi, Noah. Long time, no see. Sorry we didn’t get a chance to chat on our last… op.”

Noah returned her smile. “Hey, Kara.”

She walked to his side to pull him into a hug. “Look at you, all grown up and so handsome.” She ruffled his hair affectionately, and it was entirely too adorable. She went on, “I know I was only your mother’s bodyguard for a couple of years, but I remember vividly how close you and the other Heirs were. I’m glad you all have Jojo back with you now.”

“Me too,” he replied, glancing my way with that beaming smile full of love that melted me from the inside out. “It’s good to see you, too, Kara. How’s the shoulder?”

She flexed her left shoulder where she’d taken a bullet from Ramon’s gun. “I’ll live. Heard from your mom at all?”

His smile vanished. “Not in years.”

She scoffed, a disapproving look on her face. “Typical. Peter paid her off long ago, so she’s sitting pretty, even after the implosion of Hargraves.”

Julie piped up from where she stood next to our prisoner. “Kare, what’s the plan here? Our girl already looks a little more open to chatting with us after getting a dose of Frankie’s crazy eyes.”

Frankie cackled from where he now stood by a table near the wall, sorting through a box of his toys and murmuring sweetly to them.

I stepped closer to Miss Makeup, studying her and finding barely a dark hair out of place. “Did they at least give you a name when they dropped her off?” I asked Julie, keeping my hard stare glued to our petulant captive.

“Emily Hubert,” she replied. “Twenty-nine years old, worked at MSM for about a year. She was an administrative assistant at a Spencer wealth advisory firm prior to that.”

“She’s Elise Proctor’s half sister,” Bennett said from behind me.

I whirled to gape at him. “Seriously?”

He stood between Zach and Noah, the three of them looming in the shadows with violence in their eyes, like dark princes ready to mete out justice in the name of their kingdom.

“Yes,” Bennett replied. “I’d never met her, so I didn’t recognize her when she did your makeup. But I know that name, and now I can see the family resemblance.”

“Hmm,” I said, turning back to Emily. I leaned down to look her right in her flawlessly lined eyes. “That’s bad news for you, Emily. Not only are you in trouble for letting Spencer’s dogs disrupt my interview with Lucinda and endangering the lives of my boyfriends and my brother, but it turns out the same blood runs through your veins as the despicable cunt who played a vital role in getting my parents killed. It makes me want to bleed you out all over this floor just so I can light it on fire.”

“Hot damn, that even gave *me* the chills,” Frankie murmured.

Emily’s face contorted in anger, no longer the placid, dutiful makeup lady I’d met before. “Fuck you, Knight bitch. You’re just a stupid little girl trying to play games with the grownups.”

I tutted. “I think you’re the one who’s stumbled into the *real* grown-up games, Emily. Now I have to make an example of you and make sure your bitch sister and James Spencer get the message. What did they offer you? Money? Power? I hope it was worth it.”

She spat at me, and I shifted just in time for the nasty wad to miss my face and land on my shirt instead.

A scandalized gasp sounded behind me, and before I could blink, Mari had darted forward and slapped Emily hard across the face.

“How dare you,” she hissed. “You vile bitch. Look at where you are. You got hung out to dry by your own sister, who clearly doesn’t give a shit about you. I’d find some manners if I were you, and fast.”

I froze, stunned and more than a little bit proud of Mari, and the silence around me said I wasn’t the only one.

“Damn, babe,” Max said, whistling.

Not to be outdone, Frankie added, “Miss Mari, that was excellent form.”

I cleared my throat, squeezing Mari’s hand before I looked over at Frankie. “I think it’s girls’ night tonight. Kara, Julie, and I can take care of this one.”

He grinned, giving me an approving nod that filled me with an odd sense of pride.

“I’m staying,” Mari announced, her tone daring me to argue with her.

I blew out a breath, remembering Bennett’s words about Mari being a big girl who could make her own choices. “Okay. But if it gets to be too much, Max will come back down to get you.”

“Fine,” she said. “But I think I can handle it. This woman put you and Max in danger. I’d like to see her hurting.”

Zach stepped to my side, pulling me in for a quick kiss. “We’re sad to miss the fun, but I think this one is definitely more appropriate for you ladies. And Mari will be fine—she’s tough.”

“Okay,” I replied. “Love you. Take care of Max and keep him and Frankie separated, please.”

He snickered, while Max moaned, “Jojo, honestly.”

After Bennett and Noah had both pecked me on the lips and Frankie had given me a two-fingered salute, the boys filed out of the

basement. I could just make out the irreverent tones of Max's hassling the guys as the heavy metal door slammed behind them.

I turned my attention back to Emily, who was still seething in her chair, her nerves now visible—but not nearly enough.

She still hadn't quite grasped how bad this was about to get for her. Maybe she thought she'd dodged a bullet when I dismissed Frankie Fingers.

She was wrong.

"How far are we taking it?" Kara asked, all business.

"She'll still be breathing when we deliver her to her sister," I replied with ice in my voice. "But only barely." Then I nodded to Julie. "Cut her loose."

Her eyebrows rose, but then she grinned. "How fair of you, boss."

With a flick of her knife, she cut the zip ties binding Emily's legs and arms to the chair. Emily flew from her seat with a scream, running straight at me—the one who was unarmed, dressed in athleisure wear, and looking like an easy target.

"I'll fucking kill you myself, then, bitch," she spat at me.

I launched an uppercut right into her jaw, and she was knocked off her fancy boots in an instant. I followed her to the ground, then I made what Bennett did to Chad look like a fun walk in the park.

Mari, bless her, stood stoically through it all, only growing a little pale at the end.

Kara called it before I went too far—before I'd exorcised every ounce of pent-up rage I had about Emily's role in endangering my boys' lives, about her loyalty to Spencer and the woman who got my parents killed, about every-fucking-thing wrong with the entire goddamn City.

Kara and Julie cleaned up my mess and would later deliver the package to the steps of Spencer Tower.

Frankie reappeared to escort Mari and me back to the penthouse, where Zach helped me wash the blood from my hands and my body in my beautiful new shower. Then he kissed every inch of my skin with reverence before he helped me ride out the last of my adrenaline rush by fucking me into the tile wall while he pulled my hair and I screamed his name until I was hoarse.

That night, Bennett ignored twelve calls from James Spencer.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BENNETT



Fate was kind enough to let us enjoy a few days of peace, safely ensconced in our tower fortress away from the bullshit of the Academy, the City, and my father.

It was Tuesday morning, and I was feeling very content as I lay sprawled on the couch with my Angel draped over me like a blanket. I sorted through my email on my phone with one hand while I ran my fingers lazily up and down Jolie's back, reveling in her happy sighs.

I was also reveling in the current quiet of the penthouse. Noah was outside, braving the still-cold pool, intent on swimming laps in his wetsuit under the midmorning clouds. Zach had gone down to the security floors to lift weights and see if he could goad Rocky into a fight. Max had disappeared with Mari on some kind of brunch or shopping date, in what was probably an attempt to ensure his position as best-guy-friend was still solid now that he'd been challenged by Frankie.

The only sounds in the house were the faint sloshing of Noah's strokes out on the pool deck and the low hum of the old Dashboard Confessional song that played through the living room's speaker system.

Bliss.

"Has your father tried to call you again?" Jolie murmured, her cheek still pressed tight to my chest.

I dragged my fingertips through her loose blonde hair. “Not since yesterday morning.”

“I wonder what he thinks he’ll accomplish by calling you incessantly like that?”

I let out a wry laugh. “Force of habit, Angel. I do something to piss him off, he calls to yell at me.”

And I had no doubt he was very pissed off. He certainly wouldn’t have given a shit about the welfare of Elise’s sister, but Jolie had made a very violent and public example of his mole by tossing her battered body onto the front steps of Spencer Tower. To make matters worse, the Montgomerys published an exposé on the whole thing the next day.

When Jolie had returned from the basement soaked in blood and her knuckles torn all to hell, my heart had broken for her even as my already deep admiration had increased tenfold. My Angel shouldn’t have to sink into the brutal violence of this heartless fucking City—she had her three jaded boyfriends to do that for her now. And she had *Frankie*, for fuck’s sake.

But she would never allow that. Jolie led by example, and her people respected her first and foremost because she was on the front lines of this fight right alongside them.

Zach had taken one look at her and led her upstairs to get cleaned up, then Noah, Max, and I huddled around the kitchen island and listened to Mari describe every detail of Jolie’s brutal and righteous punishment of Elise’s rat of a sister.

That woman was also on borrowed time, and I hoped Jolie’s message had Elise shaking in her stripper heels.

“Mmm, well,” Jolie said as she snuggled deeper into my embrace, “he can’t touch you here, Bennett. Not on my watch.”

I hummed approvingly, and I marveled at what kind of fucking idiot I’d been, trying to push this perfect woman away from me under the ridiculous pretense of keeping her safe.

The elevator sounded, and Zach waltzed into the living room wearing a stolen Knight-branded gym towel around his neck, a tight tank top, and his joggers. His wet hair hung in disheveled strands across his forehead, and his dark eyes zeroed in on Jolie where she lay—relaxed and very cozy—across my body.

I knew that look. Jolie wore tiny sleep shorts under her oversized sweatshirt this morning, and I'd taken the opportunity to run my hand over the tight curve of her ass several times already. Zach's gaze snagged on that perfect ass and didn't waver as he dropped his gym bag and crawled onto the couch.

"Princess, you look delicious," he purred as he straddled my calves and grabbed two handfuls of her butt. "Has Spencer had you all to himself this morning?"

"Yes, so fuck off," I retorted lazily. "We're relaxing."

He *tsk'*d, shaking his head as he hooked his fingers in Jolie's waistband and dragged her shorts down to her ankles. "It's time for you to learn to share, my friend."

"Zach!" Jolie gasped as he exposed her bare ass to the chilly air of the penthouse. "What are you doing?"

He hiked her hips up high, and her knees came down onto the couch cushion on either side of my thighs as she looped an arm around my neck for balance. I dropped my phone to the floor to hold her steady, and I watched as she shut her eyes tight and pressed her face into my shoulder with a deep moan.

Zach had buried his face in her pussy, taking what looked like slow, deliberate licks up her center as she squirmed in my arms. I was equal parts annoyed at his interrupting our time together and turned way the fuck on by watching my Angel writhe on his face.

"You're not gonna deny our girl this pleasure by being a selfish dick, are you, Spencer?" Zach taunted me, pinning me with a challenging stare as he dipped his tongue back into her folds.

I grasped Jolie's face with two hands, pulling her from my shoulder and forcing her to bring those gorgeous eyes to mine. "Do you like that, Angel? Do you like what Zach's doing to you?"

"Yes," she whispered. "It feels so good."

"Do you want him to keep going? Do you want to take us both right here on this couch?"

"Yes," she hissed, arching her back as Zach spread her ass wide and dove back in. "Share me with him, Bennett. I want you both."

I knew I could never deny my Angel anything she wanted.

My dick was already so hard that I was in physical pain. I knew exactly what Zach was up to, and it wasn't helping. "Where's Zach's

tongue, Angel?”

He chuckled, giving her another long lick. “He knows where it is, Princess, but go ahead and tell him anyway.”

“My ass,” she panted. “He’s licking me there.”

Fuck. “Do you like that?” I rasped.

“Yes,” she moaned. “But I need one of you to give me your cock, like, immediately.”

Zach pulled back and sank a finger into what I was certain was a dripping wet pussy. “Just because I am a gentleman and an excellent co-boyfriend, I’ll let you take Bennett first, baby girl. Get ready.”

He snaked a hand underneath her and yanked on the waistband of my sweats, freeing my cock just as Jolie positioned herself on top of it. She wrapped her little hand around it and guided me to her entrance. Then she sank down, all three of us groaning in unison as she went.

“Fuck, Angel. You’re so goddamn tight.”

She rocked her hips, bending forward to brace herself on either side of my head. I pulled her lips to mine, kissing her possessively as she rode me.

Suddenly, she gasped, and I felt the intrusion that had caused such a delicious sound. Zach had slipped his slick finger into her ass, letting her rock gently against it as she fucked me.

“Oh damn, I can feel that monster in there, Princess,” he cooed. “I bet you’re so fucking full right now, baby.”

“I am,” she cried, moving her hips faster. “Oh fuck, I’m close.”

“Feel good, Angel?” I bit out through gritted teeth. “You like us filling both holes like that?”

“Yes, I want to be able to have all of you someday,” she purred. “All of my boys. All together.”

Fuck me, I might die. Never had I contemplated sharing a woman with the men I called my brothers, but never had I contemplated that the girl we’d all loved since childhood was still alive, walking this earth, and would turn out to be so fucking perfect for each one of us.

Zach caught my eye over Jolie’s shoulder, and he winked at me before he commanded, “Switch.” He jerked Jolie off my dick by her

hips and tipped her back down onto all fours, then he plunged inside of her, fucking her roughly while she hovered over me.

"Bennett," she whimpered as our eyes locked. "I'm going to come."

I stole another filthy kiss. "Yeah? If you come for him, you'll have to come again for me too. It's only fair, Angel."

"Okay," she promised, nodding vigorously. "Just let me come."

"You heard her," I barked at Zach. "No more fucking around."

He rolled his eyes at me, his brutal pace never faltering. "Get her clit, then, man."

I reached between Jolie's legs, finding that bundle of nerves and rubbing it with rough, vigorous strokes. Her eyes rolled back into her head, and I felt her body tense above me as Zach swore viciously.

"That's fucking right, Princess. Choke the life out of my cock. *Fuck*."

She screamed, and I slammed my lips back onto hers to swallow those sweet sounds as she came. Zach let out a pained groan, signaling the end of the road for him.

He slipped out before gently sliding her right back onto my dick, and she took my girth easily this time. She sat up, rocking lazily, her eyes hooded and her grin satisfied as she stared down at me with all the love and affection I craved.

"You want to come inside me, too, Bennett?" she asked. "You want to claim me just like Zach did?"

I growled, "I'm going to fill you so fucking full, Angel. But you have to earn it. You have to come again first."

"His Highness has spoken," Zach teased, kneeling behind her and helping her stay upright as I pumped my hips upward, fucking her from below. "Give us one more, baby girl, and then you can have all the cum you want."

"Yes, yes, yes," she chanted, throwing an arm around Zach's neck as he pressed her back to his chest. "Give it to me, Bennett."

I roared, slamming up into her while she held onto Zach for dear life. He shoved his tongue into her mouth as she cried out, and I knew we'd won as she clamped down hard on my dick, her second climax arriving just in the nick of time.

"Bennett!"

“Oh *fuck*, Angel. Fuck.” I let myself go with a low groan, emptying into her as spots danced across my vision.

She sagged, leaning back into Zach’s arms as she reached for my hand, threading her fingers through mine. Zach placed a tender kiss into the crook of her neck, and I did the same as I brought the inside of her wrist to my lips.

A throat cleared from the patio doorway, and I quickly moved to sit up on the couch, my softening cock still buried inside my Angel.

Noah stood there with an amused grin on his face, his hair damp and his wetsuit unzipped and hanging down around his hips. “Hi, sweetheart. Have fun?”

She gave him a gorgeous, happy smile. “Hi, Noah. Yes, Zach and I taught Bennett how to share.”

“I am not a child. I know how to share,” I grumbled.

Noah meandered over to us and leaned over the back of the couch to steal a kiss from Jolie. “Don’t listen to Spencer,” he whispered. “We’ll have to make sure he keeps practicing.”

“Often,” Zach added.

“Dicks,” I muttered, but one look at Jolie’s gorgeous, sated face as she smiled down at me and I was certain we would absolutely be doing this often.



Fortunately, when the elevator announced yet another visitor to the Knight penthouse, we were all fully dressed and mercifully free of the evidence of what three of the four of us had just gotten up to on the living room couch.

When Dom, Laura, and my *mother* walked into our kitchen, the sense of how close we’d actually just cut it to having our parents walk in on a fucking threesome was palpable.

“Hi, kids,” Laura gushed with a big grin as she took in the kitchen, the living room, and the view of the patio. “Hope we’re not interrupting anything? Just wanted to drop by for a quick visit, see the place, check on things. You know, the usual parent stuff.”

Jolie coughed into her coffee mug, the pink hitting her cheeks telling me her mind had gone where mine had, before she replied, “Nope, now’s a great time for a visit.”

I was standing by our espresso machine, so I put another cup on for my mom as she sidled up next to me. “Hey, sweetie. I just wanted to come by to make sure you were… okay.”

“I’m great, Mom,” I replied, pulling her into a quick hug before stepping back to examine her.

Her blue eyes were bright, and her affectionate smile was big and genuine. She’d pulled her blonde hair into an easy ponytail, and she wore a soft pink sweater and stylish jeans.

She gave me a knowing look, reaching up to run her hand down my cheek. “I’m weaning off my pills, Bennett. I’m ready to be… present in my life now.”

I handed her a little cup of espresso, which she took with a gracious smile. “I’m happy to hear that, Mom.”

The rest of the group had gathered around the dining room table where Zach had put out the giant cheese board he’d had delivered yesterday, so I led my mom over to an open chair before sliding into another next to Jolie.

“—been chasing Spencer goons out of Olde Town, but that’s nothing new,” Dom was saying, and my hackles went up immediately.

“Are they looking for my mom?” I asked. “And where’s Martinez, anyway, Mom? He’s supposed to be watching you.”

She waved a dismissive hand at me. “Dominic and Laura are perfectly capable, and I asked them to bring me to see you. John *is* allowed a day off, Bennett.”

I narrowed my eyes at that breathy, affectionate utterance of Martinez’s first name, then I caught Jolie grinning into her coffee cup.

“Mom, Martinez had better be doing his damn *job,* or I will introduce him to Knight Tower’s workroom.”

Zach and Noah both tried and failed to smother their amusement at my obvious distress, and Dom was no different. Only Laura kept her face fastidiously neutral, and it was suspicious as fuck.

My mom crossed her arms with a petulant huff. “Bennett James Spencer, that hostility is unnecessary.”

“*Anyway*,” Dom said. “Bridgette has been… learning a lot now that she’s spending time outside Spencer Tower, and she’s been worried about you kids.”

Mom sighed before turning her clear gaze to me, and the overwhelming relief I felt at seeing her so alert had me kicking myself for not finding a way out for her sooner. “Your father has obviously kept a lot of things from me over the years. I can’t say I wasn’t aware that Spencer has its hands in some… unsavory things, but I also put a lot of effort into disassociating from it. And from my marriage. I’m so sorry I wasn’t more present for you, honey.”

Jolie clasped my hand in hers under the table. I never resented my mother for what she’d done just to survive, especially as I’d grown older and seen just how shitty of a husband my father was, but her words did wonders to soothe a wound I’d done my best to ignore for years.

Mom went on, “And now that I see what’s really been going on? And what he did to our little Jojo?” She turned her now teary gaze to Jolie. “Sweetie, I’m so sorry. I realize now that you’ve been very well taken care of, but I also know how much these boys ached without you. I’m so devastated over what my Family has done to yours, I can’t even put it into words.”

Jolie reached across the table to give my mom’s hand a little squeeze. “No apology necessary, Mrs. Spencer. I’m just glad Bennett will be able to provide a better life for you now.”

She nodded, wiping her eyes. “It’s all thanks to you, sweetie. I’m so happy you’re all together again. Even if while you were growing up, we didn’t exactly contemplate that you’d be together… like *this*.” She shook her head with a tinkling little laugh.

Zach smothered his own laugh with a cough while Noah and I both cleared our throats, all of us doing our best to look really fucking innocent—which was difficult after what we’d just done to Jolie on the couch ten feet away from us.

I gave my mom one last assessing stare. “And you’re really not going back to him?”

“No,” she said with a sad smile. “Not after what I’ve learned he did to the Knights. I couldn’t stomach being there anymore, anyway,

Bennett. He's become much less discreet with his… activities with the staff."

"Fucking Elise," I growled, and Mom winced, the tears flowing freely now, and it made me want to drive to Spencer Tower and bury my fist in father's face *tonight*.

Jolie reached for Mom's hand again. "Mrs. Spencer, listen to me. Elise Proctor is a dead woman walking. I am going to end her life with my bare hands for what she's done to both of us. I promise."

Mom laughed through a sob. "Bennett, please marry this girl."

"Planning on it, Mom," I replied with a cocky grin.

Jolie's jaw dropped the tiniest bit before she snapped it closed, her little smile and pink cheeks satisfying something primal within me. I ignored the grumbling from her other boyfriends.

We'd sort *that* shit out later.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JOLIE



After a few minutes, Mrs. Spencer was back to smiling again as she took a delicate bite of cheese from Zach's unnecessarily large charcuterie board. Bennett had wrapped his hand possessively around my thigh under the table, and I tried to decide if I had the brain space to process his casual declaration that we'd be getting married.

"I can't help but be worried for you still, Bennett," Mrs. Spencer said. "Challenging your father like this. Dominic and John tell me that Spencer is… taking some hits, but your father can be so…."

"Vindictive? Soulless? A violent asshole?" Bennett finished drolly.

She let out a humorless laugh. "Yes, exactly."

"Spencer is dying while the Knight empire is thriving and powerful, Mom," Bennett said. "This tower is a fortress. He won't touch us here."

Noah returned to the table after pouring himself a second mug of coffee, and he handed me a fresh mug as well, like the perfect man he was. After a smug smile at the lusty look I gave him *and* my coffee, he looked at Bennett's mom. "Has someone explained the Shadows to you, Mrs. Spencer?"

"John has," she replied, smiling down into her little cup of espresso, and I felt Bennett tense next to me.

Oooh, Martinez was in trouble. But also, *get it, Mrs. Spencer*—Martinez was kind of a Daddy, and I would let Andrea throw me off the roof of Ferrero Tower before I ever said that to Bennett.

Noah smiled warmly at Mrs. Spencer. “Then you know what kind of force has been working against Spencer and the other Families for years now. Jolie’s united a lot of connected, talented people, and many of them have a personal stake in seeing the Families fall.”

“A lot of us have lost people,” Dom added soberly. “We won’t let it happen to anyone else.”

All three of my boys eyed Dom curiously, and I realized they hadn’t heard his story yet. I said, “Dom had a very close friend from his time in the special forces who worked for Ferrero and… didn’t make it out.”

Zach’s eyes widened. “Fuck, did you have someone on that gun run that was ambushed fifteen years ago?”

He nodded. “My best friend from my combat unit—Captain Joseph Turk. He wanted nothing to do with that stuff. He’d been content to work security at the casino, but the powers that be knew his background and wanted his skills on the runs. He refused, but then Andrea’s head Enforcer at the time paid a visit to his pregnant girlfriend, and he changed his mind. Seven months later he was dead.”

Zach blew out a breath, a pained look marring his handsome face. “I’m sorry, Dom. That incident is still talked about as the worst hit Ferrero ever took—at least before the Shadows blew a hole in my mom’s muscle to pull me out of that warehouse. I heard Mom didn’t even give restitution to any of the families of the men and women who died.”

“That’s correct,” Dom replied.

“And that’s why you joined the Shadows?” Bennett asked him.

He nodded. “I’d heard rumblings about the organization for years. No one on the Southside has any love lost for the Families, but you don’t bite the only hand that feeds you, you know? But that incident pushed me over the edge. I couldn’t just let Joe die without trying to do something about it.”

“And Gemini joining made the mission seem like it could be more than just a dream,” I pointed out.

“Gemini?” Noah asked, crunching his brow.

“She’s an anonymous benefactor that joined up around the same time I did,” Dom replied. “The Shadows really became a power to be reckoned with then, because she brought a *lot* of money with her.”

Bennett looked suspicious. “And what’s her story?”

I shrugged. “No one really knows. I met her briefly over video once, and she checks in occasionally. Now that Knight is able to fund the Shadows completely, she seems happy to sit back and watch us work.”

Mrs. Spencer still appeared uneasy. “And what’s the end goal? Will you settle for Peter, James, and Andrea losing their money and power? Or will you keep going until someone is… dead?” Her wide blue eyes went to her son once again. “Will you kill him?”

“If that’s what Jolie wants,” he replied.

The entire table was silent for a beat before Noah asked me, gently, “What truly was your end goal when you started this, sweetheart?”

I met Dom’s and Laura’s gazes, both of them warm and understanding, before I formulated my answer. “Honestly? I was going to wreck the City and take everything from Peter, Andrea, and James. I’d destroy their lives—maybe they ended up dead and maybe they didn’t, as long as they were fucking *done*, it didn’t matter. Then I was going to take my family and get the hell away from this place I thought I hated. I’d leave it to the Shadows to build something better.”

My boys watched me closely. “But…?” Noah prompted.

“But….” I blew out a breath before I met Noah and Zach’s eyes, and I squeezed Bennett’s hand where it remained wrapped around my thigh. “I think a big part of that was the idea of living in the City without you guys—on opposite sides of everything, with you knowing I was alive and hating me for what I was going to do to your Families—it was too much for me. I wanted to run away. But now that I have you? Now that we have a home together and are all working to take everything from your parents and use the power of Knight to make some real changes for the City?”

Zach’s smile was so wide, so full of love, that I almost stopped breathing. “Now staying here doesn’t seem so bad, does it,

Princess?”

I felt the flush hit my cheeks, which only made all three of my boys chuckle. “I think I’ll stick around,” I replied with a nonchalant shrug of my shoulder. “I know Dom didn’t really want to sell the gym and run off to the Virgin Islands with me, anyway.”

Everyone laughed, and the mood lightened considerably for a few seconds until Dom said, “You’ll get your happily ever after, Jojo, but first we have to keep you alive. We know Ferrero and Spencer don’t have the resources now to attack the behemoth that Knight has become, so they’ll continue to target you personally like they did at Montgomery. Everyone needs to stay alert until we can end this thing.”

Bennett pulled his hand from my thigh and threw his arm around my shoulders instead, pulling me tight to his side. He looked at Dom. “Always. Nothing touches her.”

Zach and Noah nodded, resolute as he was, but I knew the score. I was going to bear the brunt of the Families’ anger and frustration as they attempted to cling to power and relevance in the City—and tried to take their Heirs back by force.

I just had to be ready.



The rest of the break flew by, and the four of us never left the lovely little cocoon we’d created in the Knight penthouse except to pop down to the security floors on occasion to train or bullshit with the team.

Max and Mari were more adventurous, coming and going from Knight Tower as they pleased, Max keeping Mari safe while Mari enjoyed showing Max her favorite spots in the City he’d rarely visited as a born-and-bred Southsider.

On Friday morning, Max, the boys, and I spent our usual couple of hours in the gym. Zach and Max had gone several rounds in the cage while I ran on the treadmill next to Noah. While I ran, I kept one eye on the two idiots beating the shit out of each other and the other on Bennett’s ass while he squatted an ungodly amount of weight.

We returned to the penthouse sweaty and in good spirits, and even Max and Zach's bickering in the elevator over who actually won their fight couldn't put a dent in my relaxed mood.

As we exited the elevator, Mari's soothing voice sounded out in the living room. "And now reach forward, rooting your energy into your feet as we move into warrior two."

We padded quietly into the kitchen, and there in front of our huge couch was Mari, hair braided back, wearing a sparkly purple sports bra with matching high-waisted leggings, and holding the warrior two pose on her mat. A shirtless Frankie was next to her, mirroring her pose.

"Alright, well—now I've seen everything," Zach muttered. "Frankie's wearing yoga pants and happily engaged in an activity that doesn't involve maiming anyone."

I grabbed Max by his shorts and physically sat him down on the barstool furthest from the living room. I didn't have to even look at him to know his eyes were now glued to Frankie's lean, tattooed torso and those extremely low-slung, tight pants.

"Jojo, what the fuck!"

"Lock it up, Max," I said, pointing a finger in his face. "No eye-fucking Frankie, and no weird posturing with him over Mari's friendship. I am in a fantastic mood, and I don't feel like dealing with your weird bullshit with him *that you still refuse to tell me about.*"

I wasn't pouting, no sir.

He smirked at me. "Stop pouting, sis."

"Hi, guys!" Mari called, waving. "We're almost finished."

Frankie ignored us, bending over into a perfect downward dog that made me want to slap my hand across Max's eyes.

Zach's phone buzzed. "What's up, Marcus?" he asked as he lifted it to his ear, stepping away from where he, Noah, and Bennett had been setting out food for lunch and very purposefully ignoring the Frankie situation in the living room. "Oh, really? They just showed up without an appointment? Bold move." He listened for a few seconds. "Let me run it by the boss. I'll text you."

He hung up, and I raised an eyebrow at him. "What are we running by me?"

“Actually,” he replied with an amused grin, “I meant Mari. Her parents are here unannounced, and they request a meeting with the head of Knight.”

“What!” Mari shouted from where she now lay flat on her yoga mat.

“Shh, Miss Mari,” Frankie cooed. “We’re doing *savasana*—relax your body and your mind.”

I sighed. Back to business, then.



Mari regarded her parents coolly from across the conference room table. “And you two thought you’d just show up here at Knight Tower and demand to see Jolie Knight, without a prior appointment, on a random Friday morning?”

“Mija, this is ridiculous,” Mrs. Anzaldua replied, bristling. “We were in the neighborhood and popped by. You act like we’re doing something so *terrible*—your own parents.”

Mari didn’t respond, instead continuing to stare at her mom and dad with an air of superiority that had just the right amount of annoyance mixed in, and it made me very proud. She looked the part too. While she still wore her French braid from her yoga session with Frankie, she’d changed into a baby pink wool skirt suit, silky cream-colored blouse, and some towering no-bullshit nude heels.

Her mother, who had a similar classic sense of style as her daughter, wore a periwinkle blue skirt suit, and her chocolate brown hair was pulled into a low chignon. She’d turned her nose up at being received by her own daughter in a way that did not have me wanting to grant the Anzalduas any sort of favors.

But it wasn’t up to me.

Mari’s dad’s pursed lips said that he, too, was irritated, and he reached over to rub his wife’s back gently. “Ah, Ana María, our daughter is enjoying playing the part of the boss while her friend indulges her. I am sure she does not mean to insult us.”

I flicked a look over at Zach, who lounged next to me where we’d taken up the corner of the long table. I wore a silky red blouse,

cropped dress pants, and chunky heels that I'd thrown on before we came down to the tenth floor to receive our guests, but Zach had decided ripped black jeans and a very tight long-sleeved shirt sporting Dom's gym's logo were his corporate attire for the day.

It was going to take some effort to ignore how delicious his pecs looked in that shirt to focus solely on supporting Mari, but I'd suffered through worse in my life.

Zach looked just as unimpressed as I was with Mari's parents, despite the few respectful looks they'd tossed his way since they'd sat down. He was here as Knight's liaison for all things Ferrero, and the giant luxury hotel chain run by the Anzalduas was solidly linked to Andrea's crumbling hospitality and entertainment empire.

"Yes, well," Mrs. Anzaldua continued, shaking her head at her daughter. "That's quite enough, mija. We are here to meet with Miss Knight so that we may discuss a… strategic alliance."

"Unfortunately for you," Mari said, arching a perfectly microbladed brow, "the person you'll be discussing that *strategic alliance* with is me. I am the new head of Knight Hotels and Resorts, Inc., after all."

Their mouths dropped open in unison, and Mari's resulting triumphant grin had me feeling the warm fuzzies.

Mr. Anzaldua looked at me. "Surely this isn't true? Mari is a college sophomore, por amor del Dios."

"And I'm a college freshman," I replied. "Yet you two were ready to negotiate with me like an equal. I suggest you try a little harder with your daughter because *I'm* not inclined to give you anything you want. I know how you've treated her since she returned to the City to attend Holywell."

Mr. Anzaldua blanched, turning a scandalized look on Mari. "Mija, that is a *family* matter. It has no business being brought into this conference room."

"That's too bad," she snapped. "I make the rules in this room, Papa. And I know that you two are here because our family's association with Ferrero is costing us business, am I correct? Our out-of-town hotel guests have heard all about the crimes of the Four Families and are deciding they'd rather stay elsewhere?"

They stared at her for a beat before Mari's mother gave her a curt nod.

Mari continued. “And Ferrero is, of course, not currently in a place to invest further in their allies either. Isn’t that right?”

Another nod.

“So, you’re here not only looking to glom onto the Knight name to improve our reputation, but you’re also begging for a handout, yes?”

“Mija, this is *your* legacy,” Mr. Anzaldua pressed. “If you are the one truly tasked with this decision, you must remember that.”

Mari hummed, looking casually down at her pale pink fingernails. “Actually, I’m creating a new legacy for myself here.” She looked up, now letting all of the hurt and anger I knew she’d been nursing since the day she’d been forced to leave Carmen behind bleed into her cold stare. “And here at Knight, I can be vocally and enthusiastically queer and receive nothing but love and support from everyone in this *entire* tower, from top to bottom. So, I’m just not sure that the regressive values of Anzaldua are a good fit for us.”

“*Marisol*,” her mother barked, banging her own pink manicured fist on the table. “You will stop that talk at once. We have told you that your private life is your own, but it should remain *private*. This is *business*, mija.”

Zach shook his head, muttering, “Jesus, read the room.”

Mari stood up, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring down her nose at her incredulous parents. “This meeting is over. Knight does not feel that it is in our best interest to ally with or invest in Anzaldua at this time.”

“Marisol!” her father all but shouted. “You are making a huge mistake.”

Mari stood her ground, but I caught the echo of a tremble through her petite frame. Zach saw it, too, and he was on his feet and marching around to the Anzaldua’s side of the table.

“She said the meeting is over,” he rumbled.

They were both out of their chairs the moment they realized Zach was stalking straight toward them. Mrs. Anzaldua slung her large designer purse over her shoulder as they backed slowly toward the door. Zach stepped into the space they’d vacated, leaning casually up against the table and blocking their view of Mari.

“Mr. Ferrero, surely *you* can see the large financial benefit for Knight that a partnership with our family would offer,” Mari’s father

said, still managing to remain haughty in the face of a scowling Heir.

“I only see what your daughter sees,” he replied, flippant. “Same as Jolie does. See yourselves out before I call security up here.”

They sputtered in protest, but one more dangerous look from Zach had them turning to hurry from the room without another backward glance.

I rose from my chair and made my way to Mari’s side, clasping her hand in mine as we watched her parents slink toward the elevator through the glass walls of the conference room.

“You okay?” I whispered.

“Yes,” she replied quietly. “That felt good. They’re still my parents, and I won’t be cutting them out of my life, but I’m going to enjoy living on my own, away from their expectations. I’ll probably make sure our hotels do survive, but they need to learn their lesson first.”

“Good. It’s all your call.”

She nodded, standing straighter. “I’m going with Francisco to the spa this afternoon. I think I’ve earned it.”

Zach snorted, and I could only shake my head.

I was going to miss the weird shit that went on in Knight Tower when we went back to the Academy this weekend, but then again, weird shit tended to follow me wherever I went.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JOLIE



It was an odd feeling, remembering that it was only about six months ago that I sat where our classmates did, watching with something like awe—or trepidation—as the Heirs entered the dining hall for the first time, striding down the aisle between the long tables like the royalty they were in this City.

Despite the massive shift in the City at large since then, not much had changed in this hall, and those awed eyes were now on me just as much as my boys as we entered, ready to grab breakfast and get back in the swing of school after our blissful week locked away in my tower.

“Still getting used to it, Princess?” Zach murmured from next to me, his fingers threaded lazily through mine as we walked. “Hate to break it to you, but eyes were on you like this even when you were pretending to be a mouthy brat from the Southside.”

I elbowed him. “I was not a brat.”

Bennett tossed me a hard look over his shoulder. “You were and still are.”

Noah chuckled from beside him. “She behaves for me.”

We reached our table at the front, the seats on the end near the aisle left vacant for us as usual. We sat, and Bennett’s dark look in my direction intensified before he shot a skeptical glare at Noah. “Seriously?”

Noah shrugged, a smug grin now on his lush lips. “I ask her nicely.”

Mari was already in her usual spot, and a few friendly faces were with her. “Ugh, chica, make them stop. We all get it, you kinky jerks. Be considerate—some of us are in a dry spell.”

I felt the color hit my cheeks, which only put cocky smiles on the faces of all three of my boyfriends. I glanced across the aisle and found Harper nestled among her remaining diehard Family-worshiping friends and staring at me with a look of such profound hatred that I almost shivered.

Almost—because Harper Jansen didn’t fucking scare me.

“That deluded bitch is still wearing her ring,” I muttered to Bennett, who had just returned to the table with a plate of bacon and eggs that he slid in front of me.

His jaw tensed, but he didn’t spare Harper a look. “My father has probably promised the Jansens that I’ll return to the fold well ahead of the actual wedding date set in the contract. He thinks I’m having some kind of temper tantrum.”

I cocked a brow at him. “I believe you accused me of the same thing at the beginning of the semester.”

He grinned—a little sheepish, at least—before reaching for my hand and lifting it to his lips to press a sweet kiss there. “I remember, and I was wrong, Angel.”

I was about to request that he please repeat that statement while I recorded it for posterity when we were interrupted.

“Spencer!” a happy, deep voice boomed, then Hatcher Robicheaux bounded up to our table, his twin brother Hans in tow.

Bennett rolled his eyes almost affectionately at two of the only guys on the men’s crew team that he seemed to actually like as they swarmed his spot at the head of the table.

“Dude, the lacrosse team has challenged the crew team to a paintball battle,” Hatcher said, punching Bennett playfully in the shoulder while the rest of our table tried not to look mildly horrified by that. “Those little bitches have been talking a lot of shit, and we need you to play. Hans says he heard you’re a fucking crack shot.”

“It is what they say,” Hans agreed with a cheeky grin.

“I’m alright,” Bennett replied with a casual shrug. “I’m not as good as Noah, though.”

Hatcher pouted. “It’s crew team only, man. Hargraves is out.”

“Bummer,” Noah muttered as he sipped his coffee, not sounding bummed in the slightest.

“But,” Bennett went on, a slow, evil smile spreading across his handsome face. “You know who’s almost as sharp as Noah? Jolie Knight—and she happens to be on the crew team.”

“*Bennett*,” I grumbled. “Paintball? Really?”

Hatcher’s dial had already been cranked back up to exuberant. “Jolieeeee! Come on, we need you. It’s gonna be super fun, and Spencer will play if you will—I know it. Pleeeeease.”

Bennett was really grinning now. “Come on, Angel. Live a little. A pretend gun battle—how *exciting*.”

I glared at him over Zach and Noah’s snickers, but now Hatcher and Hans were both giving me some serious puppy-dog eyes.

“Sure,” I said, capitulating after about five seconds. “Let’s go spray the lacrosse idiots with paint pellets. I’m so pumped.”



I stared across the wide expanse of the farmland that made up Rodney Blaze’s Paintball Park. It was nearly dusk, but the waning light of the clear spring day afforded me enough visibility to take in the course before the stadium lighting that bordered the field would be switched on.

It looked like someone had raided a junkyard and scattered every item across the field that could conceivably be used to shield a human body. There were rusty metal feed troughs, several canoes, numerous pieces of metal siding out of which a bunch of huts had been constructed, and even a hollowed-out school bus painted in brown camouflage like it would somehow blend into the trampled, dying grass. The course extended through the tall trees that bordered the field, and the soft bubbling of the nearby creek was just perceptible over the symphony of insect noises playing us into the evening.

Once the men's crew team had agreed to meet the lacrosse team's challenge, one of those entitled assholes had pulled strings to clear out Rodney's facility a mere forty-eight hours later, so here we were, in the middle of a fucking school week, standing in a field five miles north of the City while a bunch of testosterone-drunk boys got hyped to shoot at each other with pretend guns.

"Don't look so excited, sweetheart," Noah called from where he lounged on a hay bale at the entrance to the course. "It'll all be over in an hour, and then we can get you your fancy dinner sandwich."

I scowled. "Don't remind me that I'm hangry, Noah."

Zach laughed from where he reclined next to Noah. "I fear for the lacrosse team, Princess. Remember your briefing: no headshots allowed."

Those two, here for guard duty, were enjoying the hell out of this. Bennett smirked down at me, his goggles sitting on top of his black beanie just as mine were, while we watched Rodney, the grizzled old owner of the place, bark instructions at the rest of our group.

"Damn, you guys must be desperate if you're recruiting from the girl's team," one of the lacrosse guys commented to Hans before he shot me a patronizing look. "We'll go easy on her, though. No one wants to be responsible for bruising the delicate skin of the Knight Heir."

I bared my teeth at the douche, who was the team captain, I was pretty sure. "Why don't you ask Cameron over there how *delicate* I am in a fight?"

All eyes slid to Cameron Murphy, the mullet-headed asshole whose knee I fucked up when he and Chad attacked me after the A Dorm party last semester. He wore a titanium knee brace over his black fatigues, and his face reddened at the attention as he looked anywhere but at me.

The death stare Bennett now aimed at him would've had anyone pissing their pants. He let Cameron squirm for a few seconds before turning those intense green eyes on me. "Angel, did he fucking touch you?"

"Not really. I broke his knee and knocked him out cold before he could do much besides call me slum trash."

Everyone stared at me in wary silence for a beat, then the lacrosse captain spat, “Un-fucking-believable, Murphy. Now Spencer’s going to take your head off in the first thirty seconds. You’re fucking useless to us.”

“Alright!” Rodney shouted at us. “Green team, move out through the trees to the second half of the course. Blue team will start on this side. Remember, if a paint pellet is broken anywhere on your body, you’re out. Exit the course through any gate in the perimeter fence and return to this spot. If you get lost out there, I’m not coming to fucking find you.”

Fair enough, Rodney.

The lacrosse team—wearing dark green vests over their matching black fatigues—dispersed out into the field and disappeared into the trees. Our team wore navy vests over our own black clothes, and I watched in amusement as they all became very serious as they combed over the junkyard to find the best places to hide.

“Ready, Angel?” Bennett asked, pulling his goggles down over his eyes. “If you manage more kills than me tonight, I’ll reward you by letting you put my cock in your mouth.”

Noah laughed. “So generous, Spencer.”

I gave Bennett a savage grin as I pulled my own goggles down and adjusted my beanie. “And in the unlikely event you beat my kill count, I’ll reward you by sitting on your face *while* I suck your cock.”

Bennett let out a pained groan, adjusting himself in his fatigues as the other two howled.

“Did that backfire on you, Spencer?” Zach called.

Rodney sounded the starting bell before Bennett could respond. With one last wave at Zach and Noah, I bolted for the trees, intent on taking out all of our opponents before the hour was up so that I could return to the Academy to finish my homework, eat my sandwich, and snuggle up naked with any or all of my boys.



Sometime later, I stalked quietly through the trees, headed into green team territory like the silent, deadly predator I was. Bennett and I were in a dead-even heat on kills, and I knew there were at least three more lacrosse assholes hiding in the woods, because I'd seen them flee this way like a bunch of babies after I'd taken out four of their group from behind an old tractor parked at the tree line.

Bennett had indeed eliminated Cameron from the game within the first minute by nailing him with a clean shot right to the base of the throat, causing him to collapse to the ground and gasp for air like he was dying until one of his teammates dragged him across the field to dump him unceremoniously by the fence line. Then Bennett and I had stuck together for a bit—an unstoppable and frankly unfair force, the two of us—but he'd just peeled off to chase a few stragglers back into blue team territory.

I knew he wanted to beat me, and I welcomed the challenge. I was maybe *kind of* actually having fun out here, putting my skills to use in a non-life-threatening situation for once.

Later, I'd kick myself for having those sorts of thoughts, because it just wasn't the life I'd chosen to live.

The snapping of a branch caught my ear, and I whirled just in time to catch a green-vested body duck behind a boulder that sat in a small clearing. I advanced, creeping from tree to tree and working my way around to the side to see if I could get a clear shot.

When I finally darted out from my chosen tree, ready to fire, my opponent did the same, his weapon raised high and aimed right at my head.

That is not a fucking paintball gun.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JOLIE



The thought registered a split second before he squeezed the trigger, and I felt the *real fucking bullet* graze my shoulder as I dove back behind my tree.

I dropped my useless fake gun immediately, digging a gloved hand under my long sleeve to depress the panic button on the dainty rose-gold Rolex the boys had gifted me over the break.

Then I yanked *my* real gun from the pocket of my cargo pants.

"Motherfucker," I growled under my breath as I flicked the safety off and checked the magazine. "I was enjoying a little *frivolous fucking fun* with my teammates." I leaned around the tree and fired a quick shot at the asshole, who had jumped back behind his boulder. "But noooo. No, can't have that, can we?"

The skin at the top of my left shoulder stung, and I could feel the cool breeze of the evening air hitting the exposed wound where the bullet had torn my shirt. It was just a graze, and I was really fucking lucky it wasn't more serious.

The sound of heavy boots crunching the dead grass and not even trying to be stealthy kicked my heart up into my throat. Reinforcements were arriving now that I'd been located—alone and vulnerable.

"Orders are to eliminate target on site!" someone shouted.

“She’s behind that tree, but she’s armed,” boulder guy announced.

I yanked my goggles from my face and chucked them behind a nearby tree. The sound of them thumping to the ground pulled their focus away from my tree for a split second, and I used it to lean around the trunk to fire into the group.

There were half a dozen or so of them, and I witnessed my bullet burying itself in one guy’s thigh before I shielded myself again.

As he roared in pain, the one who was apparently the leader shouted, “Advance! Secure her now!”

Adrenaline pumped at a furious pace through my veins. I readied myself to take another shot and make it fucking count, but I knew I couldn’t take six attackers alone.

It was a good thing I wasn’t alone.

Gunshots sounded from the trees surrounding us, and two men dropped to the forest floor with little more than pained grunts.

“Take cover!” the leader roared.

Another shot from the trees. Another body dropped.

Bennett stalked into my line of sight, his goggles on his forehead and his Glock raised high.

And he looked really fucking mad.

“Hey, Princess. Save some for us?” Zach whispered as he appeared from behind a dense group of shrubs nearby, sneaking toward me with both of his guns drawn. His smirk died when he saw my shoulder. “Baby, you’re bleeding,” he said, alarmed.

“It’s just a graze, Zach,” I replied under my breath. “I’m okay. I promise.”

Another shot—another cry of pain before the thud of a body dropping.

Zach nodded, momentarily satisfied, then he motioned for me to get moving. I rolled to my feet and crept out from behind my tree. Bennett advanced on the boulder where the remaining attackers hid, and we joined him, fanning out around it, our weapons raised.

“Where’s Noah?” I asked Zach under my breath.

He jerked his head toward the hill that rose beyond the clearing. “Finding the high ground.”

“Good,” I said. “Let’s smoke them out.”

We converged on the boulder. Some haphazard shots flew in our direction, then the leader shouted, “Retreat!”

Two bulky black-clad bodies bolted from behind the huge rock. They took off through the clearing and up the small hill, and we gave chase, firing round after round as we all weaved through the trees.

“Fuck, I’m out of ammo,” I huffed.

“Me too,” Bennett said as I heard the telltale click of his gun.

Zach had holstered one of his pistols already, and he waved his remaining gun. “I have a few left in this one. They’ve got to be getting low too.”

A shot sounded from up ahead, and one of our targets went down. The remaining man dove behind a fallen tree trunk, swearing viciously, then he fired several rounds up into the branches of a nearby tree.

Then his gun clicked.

“Take him alive!” I called to Zach as he ran at top speed toward the log with a feral smile. I heard the sounds of flesh hitting flesh as he tackled the man to the ground.

“Noah?” I called out, looking up into the trees. The shots that felled the last few men had come from somewhere.

“Here, Jojo,” he rasped.

I turned to find him gingerly dropping from a low branch of the big, stately maple tree to my right. His sneakered feet hit the ground, and he collapsed like his legs couldn’t hold him.

Then I saw the blood.

“Noah!” I screamed, my heart in my throat, icy dread shooting through my entire body, the breath snatched violently from my chest as the world spun because *my Noah was hurt*.

I ran to him with Bennett hot on my heels, my own legs giving out as I reached him.

“Oh, Noah,” I cried. “No, no, no.”

He’d taken a bullet to the outside of his thigh, the wound bleeding heavily as Noah sucked in deep breaths and winced as he shifted on the ground.

“I think it’s okay, sweetheart,” he said, forcing a smile. “It missed the femoral artery. I’ll live. I’ll live.”

Tears streamed from my eyes as I yanked the black bandana from around my neck, and with shaking hands, I shredded a long, thick strip from its edge.

“I’ve got it, Angel,” Bennett said softly, taking the strip from me and helping Noah tie it tightly above his injury. He took the rest of the fabric and padded the wound in a rough patch job that would have to last until we could get Noah to the hospital.

“Hey,” Noah said, already sounding calmer as he cupped my tear-streaked cheeks in his hands. “Sweetheart, I’m going to be okay. I promise. It was a lucky fucking shot. They’re all in much worse shape.”

It was only then I belatedly noticed there were four more bodies strewn about the forest floor.

“I wasn’t able to get back here in time to catch the first group after we got your distress call, but I got the second one as they snuck through the back gate of the property,” he said with a little grin.

I forced a smile. “You’re amazing, Noah.”

“I know,” he replied, his grin widening and almost convincing me he wasn’t in serious pain.

Zach’s voice rang out from over by the log. “Everything okay over there?”

“Help me up,” Noah demanded.

Bennett pulled him to standing, and I ducked under his arm to support his left side while Bennett got his right. I was still shaking, the gut-wrenching panic I’d felt now bleeding into the familiar feeling of violent, simmering rage.

They hurt my Noah.

They would pay.

Zach’s face paled as we approached with Noah limping along between us. “Oh, shit, man. They got you?”

“They got me. I’ll live, I swear.”

We lowered Noah to sit on the log, then I took the opportunity to kick Zach’s captive hard in the ribs.

“What the fuck, you bitch,” he hissed, struggling against the restraints binding his hands and feet that Zach must have procured from one of the bodies.

Zach buried his fist in the guy's face, and the crunch of his nose breaking echoed through the trees. "Do *not* speak to her like that, Anderson. You're already in so much fucking trouble, and I am happy to make it even worse for you if you even *look* at my girl."

"You know this guy?" I asked, glaring down at the asshole.

"Oh yeah," Zach replied. "Daniel Anderson, previously one of Ferrero's top Enforcers until he must have run like a little bitch from the tiny skirmish we had at the Industrial City warehouse." He crouched next to Anderson, who glared at him as blood gushed from his nose, running over his mouth and dripping down his chin. "Ballsy of you, my friend, to show your face in the City after that. Did you promise to deliver the Knight Heir to my mom on a silver platter in exchange for her not putting you on one of her cargo ships and having your pathetic ass dumped into the river?"

Of course, Anderson said nothing, and Zach stood from his crouch to look at me, his face heavy with regret. "This was a Ferrero hit, baby girl. I'm so sorry we weren't more careful."

I shook my head. He had nothing to apologize to me for.

I sat down next to Noah on his log, my own legs in danger of giving out on me as I fought the fury, the adrenaline crash, the soul-deep panic that Noah wasn't as okay as he pretended to be. I gripped his hand, breathing through my nose as I tried to steady myself.

I looked at Bennett, then at Zach, and I said, "We have to end this."

They both nodded, their faces grim, but determination shone in their eyes.

My phone buzzed from its spot in one of the pockets of my cargo pants. I fumbled for it, and I saw Max's name on the screen.

"Hey," I said, ignoring the loud grunts from our captive as Zach kicked the shit out of him.

"Can you stay out of trouble for, like, five fucking minutes, Jojo?"

I sighed. "It's what I get for thinking I could go and have normal college student fun."

The loud clanging of weights in the background told me Max was at Dom's gym tonight. I heard a deep voice muttering, then Max said,

“Rocky says to tell you he’s pissed you went and did this on his day off.”

I didn’t have it in me to come up with a snarky retort.

“Max,” I whispered, unable to keep the anguish from my voice. “Noah’s hurt.”

“I know, babe,” he said, his tone softening considerably. “Spencer called it in. Kara and Julie already cleared the park and are on their way to you now.”

“It was Andrea,” I said gruffly. “We have her Enforcer bagged and ready. He’s not talking much.”

Max snorted. “That’s gonna suck for him later.”

The sound of motorized vehicles approaching caught my attention, which meant it was time to get Noah out of here. “Tell Dom and Laura I’m completely unharmed,” I said. “Then call Zepp and tell him Andrea’s time is up.”

“Will do. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hung up just in time to see two ATVs crest the small hill and zoom in our direction. They came to a stop a few feet away from where we’d gathered, and Julie dismounted from one while Kara sat on the other, taking in the scene. She’d apparently brought a passenger, his long, bare arms looped tightly around her middle from his seat behind her.

“I cannot believe you all have summoned me into the fucking *woods*,” Frankie griped, climbing down from the ATV and looking around the forest, his lip curling in disgust. “If a *bug* touches me, I swear to God….”

I could only stare blankly at him. He did look a bit out of his element here in… nature.

Zach rolled his eyes. “Stop bitching. I have a present for you.” He motioned to Anderson, who now appeared appropriately terrified.

Good.

Frankie perked up at that. “For me?” He stomped toward us, pausing to glare at a root that caught his ratty Converse sneaker, then his usual manic grin returned. “Oh, hey there, Anderson. So nice to see you again. Looks like you and I will be going on a date—are you excited?”

“Fuck you, you fucking freak,” Anderson managed to sputter like a man with a death wish, and Frankie giggled.

He *giggled*, and then he stepped casually forward, placing his shoe squarely on Anderson’s crotch and leaning his weight onto it. Anderson squealed while Frankie ignored him, crossing his arms and surveying the rest of us with mild interest as he stood on Anderson’s dick. He said, “Everyone doing okay? That doesn’t look too good, there, Hargraves.”

Noah let out a wry chuckle, motioning to our captive while Kara fretted over him in a motherly way that relaxed me the tiniest bit. “This one got off a lucky shot. Make sure he pays for that—it upset Jojo.”

Frankie ground his heel down, and Anderson screamed again. “Oh, that is cardinal sin number one in this City, my friend,” Frankie cooed, then he nodded at Zach and Bennett. “Help me load him up, then I’ll sit on him while Miss Julie drives us out of here.”

They went to work, dragging a flailing Anderson to Julie’s ATV, and I helped Kara carefully load Noah onto hers.

“I’ll get him to our hospital, Jojo,” she told me. “They’ll patch him up good as new. You guys are safe to hike out of here—I had the rest of my team clear the area.” She revved the engine and then flicked on the headlight, as the night had finally settled around us. “And don’t let Rodney give you any shit about the ATVs—he wasn’t in the mood to be helpful, so we weren’t in the mood to ask his permission to use them.”

I scoffed. “Rodney’s going to have worse problems if I find out he had anything to do with letting Andrea sneak fucking mercs onto his property.”

Kara chuckled. “I didn’t get the sense that he did, but we’ll see what Frankie can get out of our guest.”

I leaned over to kiss Noah, who was now pouting about being carted out of here while he clung to Kara like a child. “I’ll be right behind you,” I whispered. “I love you. Please don’t die.”

He pressed his lips to mine again. “I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart. See you soon.”

I watched them drive away, dread settling in my gut like a lead weight. Bennett stepped in front of me, and he pulled me into his

arms. “It’ll be okay, Angel. Noah’s tough.”

I sniffed, the tears welling again. “It’s because of me,” I said in a pained whisper. “I’m the reason he’s hurt.”

Zach snuggled up to my back, sandwiching me between the two of them, and he ran a soothing hand down my spine. “You’re the reason he *lives*, Princess. Same for the two of us. We’ll do anything to keep you safe, because there’s no us without you. We’re not doing that again—not ever.”

I could only nod into Bennett’s shoulder. I took one moment to let two of the three men I loved hold me while I broke in the dark, quiet woods, then I pulled myself together and marched out of there next to them, Noah’s recovery the only thing on my mind.

But Andrea’s demise would be next in line.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NOAH



I scowled at Kara from the cushy hospital bed I'd been confined to since last night. She was unmoved by my ire, her arms crossed over her chest as she stood at the foot of my bed, daring me to try to sneak out of here before I was discharged.

"They said twenty-four hours, Noah," she reminded me. "Twenty-four hours of observation, then you can go home. And Jojo would send me straight to Frankie's workroom if I let you walk out of here before you're ready."

I sighed dramatically, falling back onto my pillow. "Fine," I said. While Jojo would do no such thing to Kara, she would have my balls if she thought I was doing anything to compromise my healing. "I'll behave."

"Thank you," she replied with a grin. "And settle in. I have Frankie's report for you."

That pepped me up a bit. Anderson would not be enjoying his stay in Knight Tower, and I suspected Frankie—who was developing a soft spot for his lovely boss, Jolie Knight—made sure Anderson paid for what he'd put Jojo through in his desperate attempt to earn back a shred of credibility from Andrea Ferrero.

As I'd suspected, my gunshot wound, while it'd hurt like a bitch, hadn't been life threatening, so the doctors working in the emergency clinic in the new and improved Hargraves Tower had

been able to patch me up without too much fuss. Jolie, Bennett, and Zach had camped out in my room until I sent them all home to sleep comfortably in an actual bed, and I made them all swear to go to class this morning too.

“So, was Frankie able to confirm this was Andrea’s doing?” I asked Kara.

She nodded. “Yes. The sense we’re getting is that while Andrea and James Spencer are technically still aligned and claiming to be united as the sole representatives for the Four Families, they’re butting heads, and this was Andrea’s attempt to claim she succeeded eliminating Jolie where Spencer failed.”

The pain that lanced my chest at her words was so familiar. I’d already been forced to watch my small, fragile best friend die right in front of me once, and the thought of losing Jolie again—for good—was a nightmare I couldn’t fathom.

My mood darkened. “Who the fuck tipped them off to the paintball match?”

“Our guest did not actually have that information,” she replied. “And Frankie assures us that he was very thorough in checking the veracity of that claim.”

And Frankie was nothing if not thorough.

I crossed my legs and shifted to sit up higher against my pillows, thankful I’d been allowed to change into my worn Holywell Crew long-sleeved T-shirt and track shorts instead of continuing to look ridiculous in a hospital gown. I pulled my phone from the table next to the bed and went straight to my secure chat with Silver to see if she had any news.

“Really, it wasn’t a secret that Jolie was going to participate in that ridiculous dick-measuring contest between men’s crew and men’s lacrosse,” I said as I hammered out a text to Silver. “Hatcher Robicheaux practically shouted it across the dining hall. Any one of the students from families who remain loyal to Spencer or Ferrero could’ve squealed.”

Kara’s no-nonsense face softened as she looked me over, her understanding gaze taking in my bandaged leg before moving to the troubled look I wore. “I know you boys are worried for her—we all are—but she’s so strong, and she’s surrounded herself with capable,

loyal people. And—" She paused to shoot me a wink. "—let her worry over you a little bit too. I've known the grown-up Jolie Knight for a few years now, and frankly, it's good to see her acting like a normal teenager in love and not an emotionless robot."

My mind flashed to the *vast* array of emotions I'd been able to elicit from my girl since she'd literally parachuted back into my life. She was hardly emotionless around me, not even when she'd been masquerading as Joanna. I was saved from having to adjust myself in my shorts in front of Kara by a knock on the door. She turned away from me, back in bodyguard mode, and strode over to answer it.

"What are *you* doing here?"

I sat up straighter. I wasn't expecting a visitor who wasn't Jolie or the guys, and the venom that had dripped from Kara's words was alarming—Kara was tough and took no shit, but she was generally pretty chill.

"Kara, oh my gosh," a familiar voice gasped, and my stomach sank. "Are you back with Hargraves after all these years? Are you working for my son?"

"What do you want, Celine?"

"Goodness, what is with that attitude? Is that how you're supposed to address your superiors, Kara?"

Well, that was enough.

"*Mom*," I barked. "Do not speak to Kara like that."

There was a beat of silence before my mom said, "Oh, Noah, what on earth—"

"Do you want me to let her in?" Kara asked me, looking back over her shoulder.

I sighed. "She can come say whatever she thinks she needs to say to me."

Kara shot me a concerned look before stepping out of the way so that my mother could enter the room. "I'll be just outside," she told me before slipping out and shutting the door behind her.

My wayward mother, Celine Hargraves, now stood in the middle of my hospital room in the state-of-the-art emergency clinic that I owned—the clinic that was in the heart of Hargraves Tower, which I also owned with Jolie. She wore a peach-colored sundress, strappy

high heels, and the giant diamond pendant necklace that had been her Christmas present from my dad when I was six. Her honey-brown hair fell in perfectly styled waves over her bare shoulders, and her tanned body was still the lithe one of a woman who subsisted on yoga, Pilates, and whatever cleanse was the most popular amongst her coastal California friends at the moment.

She took in the dressing wrapped around my exposed thigh with wide eyes, bringing her manicured hand to her chest with a scandalized little gasp. “Noah, I just cannot believe all of this. I keep hearing about all of this nonsense going on in the City, and I finally called your father, only to find out that our own son has disowned the Family name and given all of our hard work to the *Knights*?”

“Why do you care, Mom?” I asked with a tired sigh.

She ignored me. “And then I come home to *our* tower only to find the penthouse vacant and basically falling into disrepair. Buckley informed me he was let go, and now I discover my son is in the hospital for reasons no one will tell me about. Noah, this is just insanity.”

I stared at her. I hadn’t seen my mom since my high school graduation, and she’d only flown in for the ceremony before flying right back out again. She’d moved away permanently when I was ten years old, leaving with the nine-figure check from my dad and not looking back. I hadn’t revoked her clearance to this tower because frankly, I hadn’t thought about her at all, much less anticipated she might decide to show up here now, of all times.

“Mom,” I said, infusing as much patience into my tone as I could muster, “why are you here? You have no remaining interest in Hargraves, so the state of the Family empire means nothing to you. You don’t actually give a shit about Dad, so my tossing him out of the City on his ass also means nothing to you. My graduation from Holywell is not for another two years. You have no reason to be in this City or in *my* tower right now.”

She huffed, drumming her long pink fingernails on her diamond pendant as she stuck her nose in the air. “I am still a *Hargraves*, Noah. I am still married to your father, and I am still your mother. Our name has always carried the highest clout all over the country, and this mess you've been making here is *ruining* it.”

There it was. My mother still valued the Hargraves name, and news of the Families' fall from grace was setting her back with the other rich housewives she ran around with, even all the way on the West Coast.

"Does it bother you even a little bit, Mom," I asked, reclining against my pillows again, "that Dad conspired with James and Andrea to murder the Knights in cold blood just so they could steal a priceless technology from them?"

She waved a dismissive hand. "I do not meddle in your father's business, Noah. I presume he did what he thought he must to protect Hargraves. And now I'm hearing that not only have you allowed that trampy Knight girl to take everything from us, you're *sleeping* with her? I will not allow it, Noah. I am still your mother."

I wondered if I'd done something to deserve being shot in the leg and then subjected to this. I felt a cold, quiet rage creep through my body—a foreign emotion when it came to my mother because I'd stopped caring about her existence long ago. "Mom, *I* am Hargraves now, and what I do with it is absolutely none of your business. And if you insult the girl I love in front of me ever again, I will find a way to take everything from you just like I did from Dad. Am I clear?"

"Noah! How could you speak to me like that—"

"What's going on in here?"

Jolie slipped past a furious Kara, appearing in the doorway like a glorious mirage. She'd taken advantage of the warm spring day and changed into denim shorts that showed off her long, gorgeous legs, which she'd paired with a flimsy long-sleeved T-shirt from Dom's gym. She carried a plastic to-go container from the dining hall in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, and she assessed my mom with a silent intensity that spelled trouble.

I tore my glare from my mom, dismissing her, and I only had a warm smile full of love for my girl. "Hey, sweetheart. Missed you."

She meandered further into the room, still watching my mom like a predator that had sighted her prey, and she set what looked like my lunch on the table next to my bed before handing me the warm cup of coffee she'd brought me because she was a goddess among mortals.

“Hi,” she murmured, now looking at me with the same worry on her face she’d worn since I’d fallen out of that tree last night. She leaned down to kiss me softly, and I cupped the back of her head to deepen the kiss, drinking in her tiny moan like I needed it to live. After a second, she pulled away, assessing me again. “How are you? Are you in any pain? Kara said you were trying to leave early. Noah, you have to do what the doctors say or you’ll hurt yourself again, and I just can’t—”

I kissed her again, ignoring the dramatic huff from my mom. “I’m okay, sweet girl. I was okay last night, and I’m still okay now.”

My mom cleared her throat. “Noah.”

“You promise you’ll stay here until the doctor clears you? I can skip crew practice this afternoon and hang out with you—”

“*Noah.*”

“I wouldn’t complain if you stayed with me for a little while,” I replied. “I’ll share that sandwich you brought me, and then we can take a nap.”

“Noah! I am not finished speaking to you. You will stop carrying on with that traitorous little skank and help your father reunite Hargraves with the Families!” She stomped a high-heeled foot like a toddler.

Jolie went rigid, standing up from the side of my bed and turning to face my mom. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Hargraves,” she said, her voice ice cold. She paused to look down at me, stage-whispering, “Are we still calling her that?”

I snorted. “They are still carrying on with their farce of a marriage.”

She nodded, turning back to my mom. “Mrs. Hargraves, do you know who put a bullet in your son’s leg last night?”

“Whatever happened, I am certain it was due to his involvement with *you*.”

“It was a *Family* Enforcer. He could have *died*. But you don’t give a shit, do you? You’re ambushing him here *in his hospital bed* to whine about—what? Your fake husband no longer being the fake ruler of the City? Did someone make a snide comment during Pilates class and hurt your feelings?”

I shifted uncomfortably in my bed. My mom needed to get the *fuck* out of here so I could put my hands on my girl.

“Noah, I cannot believe you’re letting her speak to your mother like that!”

I shrugged. “I don’t see a mother in this room. Do you, Jojo?”

“Noah!”

Jolie’s beast was out now, and she stalked slowly forward, and whatever my mom saw in her face caused her to take an alarmed step backward.

“Leave,” Jolie said in a low voice. “You’re nothing to Noah, just as you’ve shown he’s been nothing to you since he was ten years old. I remember what it did to him when he realized you really weren’t coming back. He might’ve forgiven and forgotten a long time ago, but I haven’t. If I see you in my City again, I’ll break your face so badly that your plastic surgeon will have a hell of a fucking time fixing his hard work.”

She gaped at Jolie, her cheeks flushed red as she sputtered, “Noah, she threatened me! I cannot believe you’re carrying on with this crass… *pretender*!”

“Get the fuck out, Mom,” I said gruffly. “I’d like to spend time with my real family now.”

Kara appeared at the right moment to grasp Mom around her scrawny bicep and march her toward the door. “Let’s go, Celine. Your access to Hargraves Tower has been revoked.”

Mom’s whines and protests faded into the background as Jojo’s ethereal eyes met mine, shining with fury on my behalf and so full of love for me that I felt like I could fucking fly, bum leg and pain meds be damned.

“Come here, sweetheart,” I demanded. “In this bed with me. Now.”

She slinked back to my bedside, a coy smile now gracing her lips. I kicked the covers down, waiting until she’d crawled in with me before pulling them back up and over the both of us.

As she melted into my arms, she whispered, “Yes, sir.”

And my mom was forgotten.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

JOLIE



I vaguely registered the sound of Kara unlocking the door before Zach's amused voice said, "Oh, what's going on in here?"

He slipped quietly into the room with Bennett right behind him. I'd left them both out in the lobby earlier to take care of their assigned tasks while I went to Noah: Zach had been on the phone with Marcus, and Bennett had tracked down Noah's doctor like a bloodhound to get the latest on Noah's condition.

By the time they joined us, I was snuggled up under the covers with Noah, tucked solidly into the little spoon position while he moved his dick leisurely inside of me, a gentle but firm hand wrapped around my throat.

Zach flopped into one of the cushy chairs near the bed, his dark eyes pinned on my face. "Princess, did you let the invalid sweet-talk you into putting out? Did Hargraves charm his way right into those sexy shorts you had on?"

"Mmm," I hummed, closing my eyes and biting my lip as Noah slipped his free hand between my legs. "He's hurt, Zach. And his fucking *mom* was just in here. I'm taking care of him."

"She is," Noah rumbled, his hot breath right next to my ear.

Bennett loomed at the end of the bed, arms crossed, disapproving look on his face, but those mossy eyes were heated as

he watched Noah slowly wind me tighter and tighter. After a second, my words registered, and he barked, “Celine was here?”

“Don’t wanna talk about it,” Noah huffed, his long fingers strumming my clit as he ground into me. “She came to whine, and Jojo and Kara tossed her out.”

“Good,” Bennett rasped. “Hurry up and make Jolie come. We have shit to discuss.”

“Fuck,” I whimpered. Noah had already brought me so close, and now that Bennett and Zach were here watching me with those eager, almost *desperate* eyes, I was about to implode in Noah’s arms.

Noah groaned. “You feel so fucking good, sweetheart. So good for me.”

“Goddamn, Princess, you’re the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen,” Zach purred.

“Give it to us, Angel. Now,” Bennett demanded.

Pleasure pulled me under, and I screamed into the pillow as Noah found his own release behind me with a long, satisfied groan into my shoulder.

Five minutes later, I was cleaned up, fully dressed, and curled up next to Noah as I ran my hands through his wavy golden hair. Bennett had given me a stern look while adjusting himself in his pants, then took a seat next to Zach. With all three of them here, I felt centered for the first time since the start of the paintball fiasco.

“Noah’s doctor will release him tonight around dinnertime,” Bennett told us. “We’ll go to class tomorrow morning as usual, and then we’ll move to Knight Tower for the weekend. I took the liberty of cancelling your office hours tomorrow afternoon,” he added, glancing at Noah.

“Much appreciated,” he murmured as he lazed in my lap, enjoying his head rub.

I looked at Zach. “And Marcus thinks we’ll be able to just waltz into Ferrero Tower on Saturday night?”

“Well, I don’t know about *waltz*,” he replied with an amused grin, “but a Ferrero gala with about half the security usually required for that type of event is as good a time as any to pay my mom a visit.”

I sighed. Frankie’s sessions with Anderson had proved invaluable to our efforts in constructing our final move against Andrea, but I

hated that Noah had to take a bullet for us to get there.

"You guys should go back to class," Noah said halfheartedly. "I know you have crew practice today, sweetheart."

I laughed. "Bennett and I are barely even on the team right now. We're not going to regattas while people are trying to kill me, and I no longer need the scholarship. My coach knows she'll see me when she sees me."

"My coach knows not to say a goddamn thing to me about anything," Bennett added like the entitled ass he was.

Zach shot me a cocky grin. "The TA of my bio lab has a major crush on me, so I can get away with skipping this afternoon."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course she does. Make sure she knows I'll break her fingers if she touches you."

"Who said my TA was a chick?" Zach countered, wagging his eyebrows at me.

"And stop talking like that unless you want to be bent over the bed, Angel," Bennett added gruffly.

And the afternoon passed just like that. We all stayed with Noah, planning, laughing, and eating the snacks that Zach had delivered to the room. Every hour or so, one of my boyfriends threatened to fuck me on Noah's bed regardless of who could walk in at any given moment. Dom dropped by to check on his favorite shooting buddy, and Silver called with her report right before the doctor arrived to discharge Noah.

By the time we arrived back at the Academy, I could tell everyone was looking forward to one day of normalcy before it was ripped away from us once again. As I clung to Noah in my bed that night, my thoughts were a confusing whirl of righteous anger and unrelenting dread.

The Families were never going to touch anyone I loved ever again. I'd make sure of it.



"So," Mari said as the four of us slipped into our seats at breakfast. "I presume you all have a solid story concocted for what happened on

Wednesday?" She eyed the crutch Noah was using to take some weight off his injured leg. "Because the rumor mill is working at top speed."

Since I *had* actually learned my lesson, I'd updated Mari as soon as I'd had a moment to breathe at the hospital Wednesday night, including gently reminding her that her new best friend Frankie was likely removing a man's appendages in the name of Knight at that very moment. She'd just hummed like that was mildly interesting before scolding me for thinking it was a good idea to be creeping around the woods alone for any goddamned reason.

I shrugged. "Kara and Julie cleared the farm by telling everyone there was a gas leak. Noah heroically ran out into the forest to find me and… pulled his hamstring?"

Hannah Langford eyed us all dubiously. "Sure thing," she said after a second, taking a dainty sip of her chai and tossing her dark red hair over her shoulder. "I presume the real story is not something I need to be aware of as a Knight Tech board member?"

"Definitely not," Noah replied.

"Great," she replied with a bright smile. "So, is everyone caught up on our Finance homework then? If you guys aren't because of…" She waved her hand in Noah's general direction. "… all of that, I'm sure I could help smooth things over with Professor Roberts. She's in my mom's book club."

Zach grinned. "Yeah, that would be great, actually. This week has been… busier than we'd have liked."

Mari gave Hannah an approving nod, and I agreed. Influence was influence, no matter how small, and we'd use whatever we could to stay ahead.

After breakfast, Bennett left the group for his Lit Seminar, but only after he'd cupped my chin in his rough grasp and laid a possessive kiss on me in the middle of Holywell Hall. Mari snickered at my flushed face—sometimes I hated being pale—before the rest of us made our way up to the third floor for Finance class.

By the time we'd made it to our usual seats in the back of the auditorium-style lecture hall, Noah's happy smile was nowhere to be found as he griped endlessly over my babying him all the way up the stairs.

“Dude, just let it happen,” Zach told him from his spot on my other side. “We’re lucky that’s all she’s doing in response to you getting *shot*. Do you remember what happened when Alastia’s goons gave Bennett a booboo on his face? Would you prefer she march into Ferrero Tower alone so she can claw my mom’s eyes out? Because I had to talk her out of that about five times after we left your hospital room the first night.”

I crossed my arms and sank lower in my seat, pouting. “I’m still mad about that.”

“I know you are, Princess,” Zach cooed at me like I was a fussy child. “But you feel better now that we have a solid plan, yes?”

I huffed. “Maybe. A little.”

Noah threaded his fingers through mine as Professor Roberts entered the hall and began writing on the whiteboard. “I’m sorry for being a butthead, sweetheart. I just don’t like being the weak link. We all have to be at our best to keep you safe.”

“We’re keeping *each other* safe, Noah,” I reminded him.

Mari, who’d been engrossed in her phone even more than normal this morning, chimed in. “Sí, this is a group effort, and I have been working for the last two days on assisting in this little endeavor—*not* that any of you have asked.” She sniffed primly, but the devious smile that *just* graced her blood-red lips said she wasn’t actually angry with us.

Zach raised an inquisitive brow. “Oh? Whatcha got for us, *Miss* Mari?”

She hummed, that smile growing. “We will see.”

It was hard to focus on the lecture after that—though I’d had the same problem when Noah made us go to class yesterday—but when the professor finally dismissed us, I felt like I’d retained at least enough to pull a B on the upcoming test.

The cluster of Family loyalists rose in front of us, and Chad sneered in my direction as usual.

“Nice face, Hendrickson,” I called down to him, giving him my middle finger just like old times. He’d had to convalesce for a week after Bennett beat the shit out of him, but he was back in class now and pissier than ever. The swelling in his broken nose was only just

starting to go down, and his black-and-blue face had turned a putrid shade of yellow green.

“Fuck you, bitch,” he said through gritted teeth.

Zach snapped his head in Chad’s direction like a demonic Doberman. “What was that, Hendrickson?”

“Nothing,” he mumbled, turning to hurry down the stairs with his groupies in tow.

Before any of the students had made it to the door, it was thrown open, and Dean Jansen marched in with two uniformed campus security officers following close behind her.

“Bettina Gomez?” the dean called, her shrewd, pinched gaze scanning the classroom.

A squeak came from the gaggle of girls surrounding Chad. “What?”

“You’ll need to come with us.”

She cast a harried, confused glance around at her friends, but, fair-weather as they were, they all looked away, some of them even taking a physical step to separate themselves from her.

I loved to see it. Bettina was on my crew team, and she happened to be one of the bitches who’d helped Harper dump me in the river last semester.

As I watched her gallows march to the door, her shoulders slumped in her tight suit dress, a realization hit me, and I felt my eyes narrow in suspicion.

Bettina’s family was in the bar and strip club business, and they were one of the few families still clinging to Andrea’s skirts as they tried to weather the storm Knight had brought onto the City.

Mari sidled up next to me, watching with an extremely smug smile as the door shut behind Bettina and the dean. “Bettina has been a naughty girl,” she said in a low voice. “It didn’t take much asking around for me to ferret out who’d decided to pass the information along to Andrea Ferrero that Jolie Knight would be at a paintball park on Wednesday night. I called Marcus, and he helped me set up a nice little present for her.”

All three of us gaped wordlessly at her.

She stuck her nose in the air with a little huff. “Honestly, your astonishment wounds me.”

Zach shook it off first. “Did you get her expelled?”

She grinned, and it was evil enough to give me a little shiver. “Her family is no longer able to pay her Academy tuition, so she will be packing her dorm before being escorted from campus, I presume.”

“Girl,” I said, blowing out a breath. “What did you do to the Gomezes?”

She examined her fingernails casually. “Really, they should have known better than to put so much of their worth—and their investors’ money—in cryptocurrency. Marcus and I just nudged their crypto exchange of choice off the ledge it was already teetering on anyway.”

Noah barked out a very loud laugh. “You two crashed CryptoCity? And you didn’t tell us? *Unreal*. Oh, Silver is going to be so pissed Marcus hid this from her.”

Zach snorted. “Those two need to just fuck and get it over with. I’ll make sure Marcus gets a raise for this, because *damn*.”

“You know, Spencer actually had a pretty sizable stake in CryptoCity too,” Noah added.

“Did they?” Mari asked, still with the tone of complete nonchalance. “How unfortunate for them.”

I smiled so wide my cheeks hurt. “I bow down to you, girl. Fuck me, this is amazing.”

“Yes, I *am* amazing,” she replied. “Obviously. Now, I’m off to my next class, but if all of you would please try to refrain from making any more messes I’ll need to clean up, that would be great.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

JOLIE



"Mr. Ferrero," the doorman sputtered at Zach, "we, uh… we weren't expecting you."

Zach's cocky grin conveyed exactly how much he didn't give a fuck. "Well, I certainly couldn't miss a gala in honor of Ferrero's favorite charities *and* my mom's fiftieth birthday, now could I?"

The poor asshole checking IDs at the entrance to Ferrero Tower's largest and most opulent ballroom was now sweating in his ill-fitting tuxedo. He stared at Zach again in confusion, his eyes bouncing over to me and widening in actual terror before he finally lifted his walkie-talkie to his face. "Um, I have the Ferrero Heir and his…."

"Girlfriend," Zach prompted.

"… girlfriend here requesting entrance to the gala."

I nodded to his walkie. "Inform the head of security we're unarmed."

"But that we are happy to make a giant scene in front of the small sliver of the City's elite still willing to associate with Ferrero by being here tonight if we're made to wait much longer," Zach added lightly.

The man did as he was told, and we were instructed to await a more "thorough inspection."

Zach looked devilishly sexy tonight in his all-black tuxedo, while I'd donned a flowy mauve chiffon gown with a sweetheart neckline

that dipped low across my modest cleavage. I swatted Zach's wandering hand away from the high slit in my skirt as we waited to be frisked by whoever had the unfortunate designation of heading up the paltry security Andrea was able to throw together for this event.

Noah's voice sounded in the microscopic earpieces we both wore. "Knight Three and Knight Four are about to drop. Do you think you'll have problems at the door?"

"Nah," Zach replied. "My mom will want to see me, despite everything, and she would *detest* a public scene."

"Let me know when the guys hit the roof, please," I whispered, attempting to keep my emotions in check. I was focused on playing my part here—I was the distraction—but it didn't change the fact that Bennett and Max were about to drop from a moving helicopter onto the tower's roof. That unnerved me *just* a bit.

Max's voice came through next. "Five minutes. Stow that worry I heard in your voice, Jojo. Big Man and I have this in the bag."

I heard Bennett grunt before Noah muttered, "I'm still pissed you guys left me in Silver's command center…. Hey, you two, stop fucking bickering…. Silver, you know we put Marcus on lead tonight because it's a Ferrero job…. Oh my God, what am I, your mom? Quit tattling to me. Lock it up, both of you."

I smothered a laugh as Zach and I watched a fresh-faced Ferrero Enforcer approach the door from inside the ballroom. I whispered, "And I thought Zepp was a pain in my ass."

The nervous doorman moved aside, and the Enforcer stepped into the lobby where we waited. He eyed Zach and me with extreme distrust.

"Mrs. Ferrero has graciously agreed to allow her Heir and his date to attend this evening, but you'll have to be searched."

Zach shot him an innocent smile. "I'm happy to receive a pat down, but if you put one slimy hand on my girl, I'll break it."

"Mr. Ferrero—"

I stepped forward and did a little twirl. "See? Nowhere to hide any weapons in this flimsy dress." I giggled like an airhead, though I doubted he bought it.

The Enforcer glared at me before approaching Zach and frisking him from head to toe. Finding nothing, he straightened and looked

me over. His scrutinizing gaze lingered a little too long on my boobs before Zach growled menacingly at him. “You done, man? I’d like to get a drink in my hand before I’m fucking thirty.”

The Enforcer motioned to the door. “We’ll have eyes on both of you all night. Don’t try anything.”

“Thanks!” I said brightly, then I grabbed Zach’s hand and flounced into the ballroom like I didn’t have a care in the world.

Something I did have, however, was a tiny knife in the bra cup of my dress. I could never go anywhere truly unarmed, and it was my security blanket.

“Knight Three and Knight Four have landed,” Noah said softly.

Bennett’s deep voice added, “Roof is clear. We’ll check in when we access the elevator.”

“Mmm, can’t wait to be working that *shaft* with you, Big Man,” Max purred.

“Max, for fuck’s sake,” I hissed.

“Can someone please remind me why my assigned partner in this heist is an eighteen-year-old high school senior and not one of the many seasoned military veterans we have working for us?” Bennett griped in his monotone.

“Unfortunately,” Noah said, his tone belying his deepest empathy at Bennett’s plight, “he’s the best lockpick we have, and that somehow includes breaking open elevator doors with a drop key.”

Max chuckled. “I am very skilled with my hands, what can I say?”

“Jesus Christ,” Zach muttered.

“Can you all fucking focus?” I said through the gritted teeth of my fake smile. “Knight One and Knight Two are in. We have eyes on Andrea.”

She was easy to spot, floating around the cavernous ballroom amongst the white-linen-covered tables on the arm of whatever opportunist had replaced Ramon as her head bodyguard. Her magenta mermaid gown fit her ample curves like a glove, and her black hair had been swept into a classic up-do. Her dark eyes—so achingly familiar to the ones I loved—scanned the room, calculating and cold.

A chamber orchestra performed Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” from the small stage erected at the back of the room, the classical vibe of

the music striking me as at odds with the almost gaudy theme of the room. Atop every table was a floral arrangement that stood at least four feet high, all the flowers a shade of magenta similar to Andrea's dress. Large neon-blue chandeliers hung from the black ceiling, each draped with endless strings of lights and hovering over the tables like gargantuan jellyfish floating above our heads. As we drifted past an empty table, I noted that the flatware had actual *diamonds* inlaid in the handles.

"Fake," Zach said with a chuckle, noticing where my gaze had strayed. "No way my mom forked out that kind of cash given her dire financial straits. She's only putting on this show to convince anyone who's looking that everything is just fine."

And we were here to put the final nail in her coffin.

"We're in position," Bennett said in my earpiece.

"Preparing to cut power," Noah replied. "You'll have ten seconds to pop the elevator doors open before it turns back on."

"I'll only need eight seconds," Max said with a scoff. "Then Big Man and I will be shimmying down that *shaft* together. I can't wait to watch him work it."

"Keep running your mouth and I'll leave you on the fucking roof," Bennett retorted.

"Bennett, you will do no such thing," I said under my breath. "Play nice, both of you."

Grumbling sounded through my earpiece, and I tuned it out to focus on the task at hand. Andrea watched us now, her deep suspicion about our presence here written all over her face, but she couldn't hide the little hint of longing—of *possessiveness*—that flashed every time her eyes landed on her son.

And while she was down here in the ballroom, wooing potential new investors, pretending to give a shit about charity, and acting like the fact that she was turning fifty didn't make her die a little inside, we would be taking from her the last leg she had to stand on.

Frankie's sessions with Anderson—one of the only long-tenured high-level Ferrero Enforcers still breathing—had yielded some helpful, but also disturbing, information. We'd already known that soon after Zach and Frankie had officially defected from Ferrero, Andrea had removed her most sensitive records from her basement

office at the Euphoria Club. Zach thought their new home was most likely somewhere in Ferrero Tower, and Frankie was able to *persuade* Anderson to confirm the exact location was Andrea's hidden safe in her penthouse office.

Ferrero had always made a substantial portion of its fortune in illegal fights, running guns, and smuggling priceless art and other antiquities. With Andrea's legitimate businesses either gobbled up by Knight or flagging as investors abandoned the sinking ship, she had to lean heavily into the illegitimate side of her enterprise. The records for these endeavors were kept old school—on paper ledgers locked away in a cabinet to which only Andrea had the key. If we could put our hands on those records, we would have detailed instructions for wiping Ferrero off the map for good.

And there was more riding on our success tonight than just my burning desire for retribution and the City's need to be washed clean of its filth—Anderson let it slip that in her desperation for cash, Andrea had finally decided to throw her hat into the ring with the lowest of the low when it came to smuggling.

Sex trafficking.

Andrea had always prided herself on her *legal* prostitution operation at the Club, where the escorts were there of their own free will, their clients were strictly vetted, and they were paid handsomely for their services. But apparently, she was desperate enough now to deal in illegal, unwilling skin, and we needed to put our hands on the details of her first shipment—imminent, per Frankie—and we needed to do it before those poor men and women were harmed further.

With any luck, Andrea would be on the fast track to *prison* after tonight.

The lights flickered, and the crowd let out a collective gasp as the room was plunged into darkness.

"Power's off," Noah barked. "You're on, Max."

"Got it. Thanks, Nehemiah," Max replied.

Noah's long-suffering sigh was audible. "Eight seconds."

I heard the slow grind of metal on metal through my earpiece, and after five seconds that felt like five hours, Bennett announced, "We're in."

The lights flickered again, and the neon jellyfish burst back to life. The orchestra resumed the music, the bartenders resumed serving drinks, and the partygoers returned to their shameless attempts to vie for Andrea's attention.

But Andrea only had eyes for her son as she floated closer, her dark pink talons wrapped around a crystal champagne glass and her haughty smile intact.

Zach and I had each grabbed our own drinks from a passing waiter, mostly for show, and he snuggled me tighter into his side as we watched Andrea approach us like she was the predator and we were her prey when, really, it was the other way around.

All the while, I tried not to think too hard about Max and Bennett *Ocean's Eleven*ing their way down the penthouse elevator shaft right about now.

"Zachary," Andrea purred as she and her bodyguard came to a stop in front of us. "This is unexpected. I was hoping you were finished with your little rebellion, but seeing as how you have that traitorous bitch on your arm, I am not optimistic."

The fake charm Zach usually displayed for his mother was nowhere to be found. "Disappointed your little hit job failed, Mom?" he spat. "Jojo and I are both getting tired of putting down your shitty mercs and subpar Enforcers."

Andrea's bodyguard frowned like he was greatly offended by that, but Andrea's cold smile only grew as she remained focused on her son, ignoring me completely. "Is that why you dropped by, Zachary? To gloat? You shouldn't bother—I can't help but be proud of the capable, ruthless man you've become. I just wish you weren't using everything *I* gave you for the wrong things, baby."

I gave Zach a little squeeze where my arm was wrapped around his waist. I knew he wouldn't let anything his mother said bother him, but none of this was fun for him. My boys had all lost one or both of their parents—not in the same way I had, certainly—but it didn't mean the loss wasn't meaningful.

It didn't mean it didn't hurt just the same.

Zach made a show of tossing back a huge swig of his drink, then he said, "We're here because we heard you were trying to lure some of Ferrero's old allies back onto this sinking ship. As the Ferrero

liaison for Knight, I thought I'd check on my interests. See if anyone was having second thoughts."

Andrea sneered. "It breaks your mother's heart to hear you talk about *your* legacy like that, Zachary. This is not a sinking ship, and this is a *charity* gala. You're just so determined to make me out to be a monster, baby, when I have done nothing but protect our Family and give you the lavish life a Ferrero Heir deserves. You've let that *whore* poison your mind."

"Not another word about her, Mom," Zach snapped. "Not another *sound* out of your mouth about the girl who you tried to *murder* when she was eleven-fucking-years old. Just like a *monster* would."

Andrea blew out a frustrated breath, her smile strained as her burly blonde bodyguard ran his hand down her back to soothe her. She took a dainty sip of her champagne, and with a little shake of her head like she was clearing out the anger, her chilly poise was back.

She finally turned to face me. "Leave—you're not welcome in Ferrero Tower. I don't care how entranced you've made my son. This war you've started only ends one way, and it's with you at the bottom of the Obsidian where you belong and order restored to this City."

I smiled back, snuggling deeper into Zach's side as he vibrated with tension next to me. "It's over for you now, Andrea. We're really just here to say goodbye."

She scoffed, turning and giving me her back as she began to walk away. Then she paused, looking back over her shoulder at Zach to say, "I'm out of patience, Zachary. Return to where you belong before you end up at the bottom of the river too."

We watched her stalk angrily away, dragging her bodyguard along, and they disappeared from the ballroom and down a hall that led to bathrooms and the kitchens.

"You okay?" I whispered.

"Yeah, baby girl," he replied, sounding tired. "I just… don't ever want to see her again."

I could only nod, and we stood there in silence for several minutes.

Until that silence was shattered by Max's urgent voice cutting into our ears. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. We're locked in. Andrea's office was

outfitted with some kind of panic-room alarm, and we're fucking locked in here."

Zach and I looked at each other in wide-eyed alarm, then we sprinted out the ballroom doors.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ZACH



"What the fuck is going on, Noah?" Jolie barked as we raced to the elevator.

"Some kind of electronic lock engaged when Max and Bennett breached Andrea's safe," he replied. I could hear his rapid typing in the background. "Silver and Marcus are trying to access it, but, as you know, the Shadows have tried for years and haven't been able to hack Spencer or Ferrero at their highest levels like this."

Marcus' voice popped online. "Ferrero, if you can get your phone close to the lock, I can get in that way."

"What the fuck kind of shit have you put on my phone, man?" I asked as I jammed my finger into the button to call the elevator. We were headed to the highest floor we could reach without a top-level security card, and then we'd take the fire stairs.

"We'll talk about it later," Marcus replied, the evasive fuck. "Just fucking get up there. We don't know who this alarm notifies and how fast they'll be able to get to the office."

"Cool, cool, cool," I chanted as we stepped into the elevator. "Seeing as how we only have the one small knife in Princess's bra between the two of us."

"We'll improvise," Jojo said, her face now eerily calm as she focused solely on saving Bennett and her brother.

Bennett was also cool as a cucumber as he said, “We’re fine. We’re both armed and can handle whatever they throw at us. Angel, do *not* put yourself in unnecessary danger.”

“Fat chance,” Noah, Max, and I muttered all at once.

Jojo scowled at me, and I just pulled her closer to press a little kiss to her shoulder.

“I’ll gut Anderson for failing to inform us of this new little enhancement to Andrea’s security,” she declared. “I’ll do things to him that make Frankie look like a fucking lovable Care Bear.”

Fuck me, now was not the time for an erection.

“Oh, Spencer looks turned on now,” Max said, chuckling. “Gross, I do not need to be on the line for your phone sex, sis.”

The elevator dinged, stopping us at the sixtieth floor and saving all of us from a tongue lashing from the Princess. She bolted out the doors, moving impressively quickly in those sexy stiletto heels I’d spent the evening imagining digging into my ass as I buried my dick in her, and I raced after her.

The door to the emergency stairwell just off the elevator bank was never locked—safety first, people—and in a few quick, arduous minutes, we’d run up six flights of stairs to the locked door that accessed the first floor of the place I no longer called my home.

“Hold your phone to the keypad, Ferrero,” Marcus instructed.

I did, and within seconds, the loud beep announced the door unlocking.

“You know,” Jolie muttered, breathing hard. “This would’ve been nice to have back when I was breaking and entering into Family towers.”

“No fucking shit,” Max said in our ears.

“It’s in beta,” Marcus replied, nonchalantly.

Noah added, “And apparently it doesn’t mask the entry—it’ll still appear to security like foreign access, so it’s only for emergencies, such as the one we find ourselves in now.”

“You don’t need to remind us,” I griped, grabbing Jolie’s hand and leading us through the entryway toward the kitchen, to find the main level dark and completely devoid of life. “So far the house is clear.”

“Still clear here,” Bennett added. “Get a fucking move on.”

“We are on the way, Your Highness,” I drawled.

Mom's office was located just off the kitchen down a short hallway. We raced that way, the light clicking of Jojo's heels against the marble tiles the only discernible noise in the eerily quiet penthouse. When we arrived at the locked door, I swore viciously.

"What in the ever-loving fuck is this?"

Mom rarely kept her home office locked, presumably because the penthouse security as a whole was tight, and also because until very recently, she'd kept her most sensitive items locked away in the basement at the Club. But now I was staring at some kind of electronic deadbolt—not a Knight brand, either—that had been remotely activated to lock the occupant inside.

"Just hold your phone up to it, dude," Marcus barked in my ears.

I did, and the seconds ticked by as we all listened to Marcus' rapid typing. Bennett, the impatient fuck, grumbled, "Why isn't this extremely useful tech on anyone else's phone?"

"I said it was in *beta*," Marcus growled. "I didn't anticipate you lot getting yourselves trapped in a fucking Family penthouse."

Finally, a bright green light flashed, and the whir of the locking mechanism disengaging was music to our ears.

We heard Noah chuckle. "Oh, don't look so impressed, Silver."

Jojo, not in the mood to fuck around, shoved the door open and darted inside. I followed on her heels, ready to lay my eyes on our brothers to ensure they were unharmed and then get the fuck out of here with the documents we'd come for.

The office was dark, the City lights outside the large window giving us just enough light to make out the shapes and features of the room. Max and Bennett had both parked themselves on the front of Mom's large desk, their booted feet swinging and their boredom evident even under their face coverings.

Jojo threw herself into Bennett's arms while Max mumbled something about being chopped liver, and I took a moment to scan the office for anything else I might want to abscond with before we bailed.

"All good?" Noah asked. "Get moving. There's no way that alarm didn't dispatch the security team. Jojo, can you shimmy up the elevator shaft in your dress?"

Princess scoffed, sounding offended. “Noah, I fucking scaled the side of Hargraves Tower in one of those stupid little skirts the Holywell bitches love to wear.”

“You did *what*?” Bennett growled.

Silver cut in, apparently having wrestled control from Marcus because he was a little bitch. “Focus, please, everyone. Get to the roof. The helicopter will meet you—”

The creaking hinges of a door being opened at the back of the office *where there was not actually a door* sent a jolt of fear and adrenaline through me as though it was the sound of a gunshot.

Bennett and Max whirled, pistols raised and aimed toward the sound. Bennett shoved Jojo behind him while Max stepped in front of me like the upstanding dude he actually was despite how much he liked to annoy the shit out of me.

“Well, well, well.” I knew that silky feminine voice so very well. “Zachary, it appears you lied to me.”

We were staring at a secret fucking doorway. A secret fucking passage into this office, hidden behind a bookshelf, that I had no idea about, and I’d lived in this fucking penthouse for eighteen years of my life.

Mom stepped into the room, still wearing her ridiculous pink dress, her new bodyguard at her side. Both of them had their handguns raised and pointed at us, so it was two guns to two.

Stalemate.

“Oh, Zachary, stop looking so shocked,” she said, flicking on a lamp that sat atop a nearby side table while keeping her dark eyes pinned on me. “I’ve made some sensible upgrades to this office since you decided to *abandon* your Family. I do know a thing or two about being prepared.”

The fact that this actually wasn’t something she’d hidden from me for years only made me feel marginally like less of an idiot.

“Rocky’s team was on standby, and we’re sending them in,” Noah said, his voice soft in our ears. “But it is going to take some time.”

I would stall, then.

“Mom, I have to say I’m extremely disappointed in you,” I began, stepping out from behind Max. “Or, I should say, I’m even more disappointed than I already was, given what you’ve done to me and

the woman I love. I'm *ashamed*, even. Human trafficking? You said things were going just fine here at Ferrero, but it seems you're more desperate than even I thought."

Her brow no longer had the ability to furrow, but I could still make out her pout in the soft yellow light of the lamp. "That's hurtful, Zachary. Ferrero has always been in the business of procuring rare, pretty things for those with the proper funds. This is *your* legacy, baby. Now," she went on, pausing to smooth her dress with her free hand. "I am willing to let you, Mr. Spencer, and even this little Southside street rat you've brought into my house walk out of here—after you've returned what you've taken from my safe, of course. Then I'd like to have a… *private conversation* with Miss Knight."

"No fucking way," came from me, Bennett, Max, and Noah all at once.

Jojo tried to muscle her way between Bennett and Max but did not get very far. "I like that idea, Andrea," she said with a feral smile. "Send your bodyguard-slash-fuckbuddy out with your weapon, and you and I can settle this like women."

My mom barked out a laugh. "Nice try, you little bitch. I suggest you do as I say—it's your only chance to save your *brother* before the rest of my team arrives. I'll make sure he dies first—while you watch. And I can't really guarantee the safety of Mr. Spencer, either."

Jojo struggled against Bennett and Max, but those two were unmovable, thank God. "Fuck you," she spat at my mom.

Noah's quiet voice cut in again. "ETA ten minutes for Rocky's team. We can't find her Enforcers, so they must be coming via the secret entrance we had no fucking idea about. Be ready, and *please* be careful."

We were running out of time here. I knew I was going to jump in front of our entire group if I had to—ultimately, my mom didn't want me dead. Hopefully, that would buy them enough time to lay down some cover fire and get the fuck out of this office.

I would *never* let my mom hurt Jojo again. I would take fifty bullets from her shitty Enforcer team if it meant my Princess—the love of my life, the other half of my soul, the missing piece who had finally made my brothers and me whole again—walked out of here alive.

“Zach, I know what you’re thinking,” Jojo whispered from behind me. The wobble in her soft, husky voice cut me down to my core. “Don’t do it. We will fight *together*.”

The sound of footsteps echoing in the dark, empty space behind the bookshelf sank my stomach to my feet.

“Uh-oh,” Mom cooed. “Looks like you’re out of time. Last chance to save your best friend and the thug, Zachary.”

I moved fast, shoving Max behind me next to Jojo. “Get her the fuck out of here,” I hissed.

“Zach, no!” Jojo cried.

“Go!” I shouted. “Please, baby girl. *Please*.”

“Stop it, Max. *Zach!*”

And then Frankie emerged from the secret doorway.

He raised his handgun and fired one clean shot into the back of Mom’s bodyguard’s head. Gore splattered the bookshelves, and the guy dropped to the floor, just another expendable Ferrero soldier after all.

“Oh, are we having a party?” Frankie asked as he crept into the office, his gun now trained on the back of Mom’s head. “Sorry I’m late, but it took me just a minute to find this very neat new set of stairs off floor fifty-nine. I’m almost impressed, sister.”

My mom had frozen, her gun now limp in her grip as she raised her hands slowly in the air. “The ways you’ve betrayed me, little brother,” she said through gritted teeth. “After everything I’ve done for you. Everything I’ve given you.”

Frankie smirked. He looked like he’d been busy—his black tank top was so blood spattered, I could barely make out the image of Che Guevara on the front. His dark hair stuck to his sweaty forehead, and he had a nasty-looking gash on his bicep.

“What the fuck is going on?” Noah hissed in our ears.

“The cavalry is here,” Jojo whispered back. “I don’t think Andrea’s team will be joining us.”

“Indeed,” Frankie said to my mom as he prowled around her, gun still leveled at her head. He came to a stop as he reached her front, and his warm brown eyes clashed with her dark ones—the loathing palpable between them. “You *have* given me so much, dear sister. Lots of interesting work. A paltry salary that kept me fed until I

received access to the guilt trust our father left me. The Ferrero name. The constant reminder that I'm lucky you didn't drown me in the bathtub when I was a baby."

"Bitch," Max rasped under his breath, the single word soaked with ire on Frankie's behalf.

Those two were cute. Jojo did not know I was on this ship, and I had no plans to tell her.

"So," Frankie went on, "I have actually brought *you* a present, sister. To repay you for everything you've done for me. I'm excited for a little family reunion, as it were."

What the fuck…?

Another body emerged from the secret doorway—a woman, vaguely familiar to me, dressed in a billowing black evening gown as if she'd just come from the gala downstairs.

I studied her features as she stepped into the low light. Blonde hair swept into an elegant, low ponytail. Brown eyes. Slight wrinkles at the corners of her eyes that said she was close to my mom's age but had allowed herself to age a bit more gracefully than Mom had.

The woman wore a wide smile that set off flashes in my memory. Bits and pieces of another blond whose smiling face had faded away over all of these years.

"Aunt… Aunt Gemma?" I sputtered.

Mom whirled with a gasp. "What the hell is this, Gemma?"

I could only stare, struck dumb. I hadn't seen my aunt since I was five years old. Sensing my need for her, Jojo snuck into my arms. She whispered, "I didn't realize it, Zach. I've only met her once, over secure video. That's Gemini."

The original benefactor of the Shadows. My dad's sister. The absent family member I never thought about because she lived in Switzerland and hadn't come back to the City after my father's death.

Gemma didn't wither under my mom's challenging stare. "This is about the fact that I never once believed that my brother died in his sleep of natural causes," she said, her calm, resolute words slightly accented. "It was too convenient that he just happened to pass away so suddenly—so tragically—a mere three days after he'd called to tell me he'd decided to leave his cold, morally bankrupt wife. So

soon after he'd decided he was going to run away with his son and never look back."

Cold leached into my veins. My ears began to ring. I clung to Jojo to remain standing. Bennett pressed into my other side.

"You're delusional, Gemma," Mom spat.

Gemma grinned again—her familiar smile making my chest ache. "You forget, Andrea, that the von Rotz family is not without resources. Just because we don't hail from one of your top Tier *City* families doesn't mean we don't have connections. And lots and lots of money."

My dad was Christian von Rotz, and he came from old Swiss money. He and my mom met on vacation in the Alps back when they were both in college. I was told I'd been to Switzerland once when I was two, but I didn't remember it at all.

Gemma went on, "I had his body exhumed, Andrea. Right under your nose."

Mom paled, and I knew without a doubt it was all true.

"Fentanyl. Enough to kill a horse," Gemma spat. "How nice to have the medical examiner on the Family payroll."

I clutched Jojo tightly as she gaped at my aunt before she turned to whisper into my ear, "I didn't know, Zach. Gemini never told us who she was or why she joined the Shadows—only that she'd lost someone close to her to the Families. I promise I would've told you if I'd known."

I pressed a kiss to her hair. "I know, baby girl. It's okay."

Nothing was okay, but the fact that Jojo had been allied with my aunt—who had been hiding this huge fucking secret—without knowing it was not the issue.

Frankie tutted. "Terrible, sister. Murder is so run-of-the-mill around here, but your own husband? The father of your precious son and Heir?"

"He was going to *embarrass* me," Mom said, seething. "He threatened to take Zachary from me. I did what I had to do to protect this Family *like I always do*."

Gemma glared at her, her lip curling with disgust. "And everything I've done since I figured out what you did has led to this moment. I put my fortune into the very organization that's now brought you to

your knees, led by the brave girl you tried to *murder* when she was eleven years old."

My mom shook her head, like she refused to accept any of this. She finally turned those cold, lifeless eyes to me. "Zachary, I only ever wanted to protect you. You are a Ferrero. You can't listen to anyone that isn't *our* Family. I am your *mother*."

I threaded my fingers through Jojo's as I met my mom's imperious stare. "Not a monster, huh? Fuck you, Mom. Every single person standing in this room is more my family than you have ever been. You took my dad from me. You tried to take my girl from me. You can *rot. In. Hell*."

Frankie beamed at me, pride in his wild eyes, and he nodded his approval at what we both knew I was going to do next.

I went to grab Bennett's gun from his hand. I *had* to end this.

She had to pay.

But Gemma beat me to it.

She pulled the tiniest pistol I'd ever seen from the pocket of her dress, and she fired one shot into my mom's temple.

I shut my eyes. My mom deserved to die for everything she'd done, but I didn't need to see her skull blown apart—even if I had been about to be the one to do that very thing to her.

She was still my fucking mom.

Princess pulled me closer, pressing my face into the crook of her neck, and I breathed her in. She smelled nice—like vanilla—and her warm skin and slow, measured breaths soothed me. "It's over, Zach," she whispered. "She's gone."

"Is he okay?" Noah asked quietly.

"I'm fine," I croaked. "I will be. I promise."

I felt a hand squeeze my arm, and I lifted my head from Jojo's shoulder to meet Frankie's eerily subdued stare. "This was the best way," he said quietly. "I'll just be going now."

I could only nod as he slipped quietly back out the secret entrance, disappearing into the night, like he did.

"Zach?" Gemma asked tentatively.

I turned her way, studying her and ignoring my mother's body strewn at her feet. The apology was clear on Gemma's face as she said, "I know I took that away from you just now, but ultimately, I

thought it was the least I could do for you—so you weren't… burdened with it forever." She stepped around the bodies on the floor, moving closer to where I still stood, holding Jolie in my arms. "And I'm so sorry I haven't been there for you all these years. I… I didn't know that you hadn't become just like your mother. I'd thought you were probably a lost cause."

I shrugged, finding I didn't have it in me to be offended by that. "There's nothing more you could've done for me, Aunt Gemma. You did what you could—supported the Shadows, who saved my girl and brought her back to me. You got justice for my dad and for Jolie." I released Jojo, and I walked over to Gemma and pulled her into a hug. "Thank you," I whispered.

"You're welcome, honey," she whispered back. "I'd… I'd like to come around more. Get to know you, if that's okay? You look so much like a dark-haired Christian. It's uncanny."

"Sure," I replied. "I'll set you up with a suite in Knight Tower. I'm thinking I'll gut this one."

Her smile was grateful. "That sounds perfect."

Then the door behind us—the office's actual door—burst open.

Rocky stood there, weapons raised in both hands and a whole group of tactical-geared Shadows behind him. "Everything good in here?" he asked, lowering his guns as he took in the scene. "Oh, hey, Gemini. What, uh… what are you doing here?"

I sighed as everyone let out an awkward chuckle. "Fuck this night. I hate it here—let's go home."

"You got it," Jojo said, grasping my hand again. "I love you, Zach. I'm sorry it came to this."

"I'm not," I said. "I love you too, Princess. You weren't going to be safe until she was gone."

She nodded solemnly, squeezing my hand as she led me away from the scene, and I felt lighter with every step I took.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JOLIE



Somehow, Zach slept like the dead last night. It was now a few hours after sunrise on Sunday morning, and I lay next to him in my giant bed, watching him sleep peacefully, like I was worried he would shatter at any moment.

The woman who murdered my mother was dead. One more piece of my soul was now at rest. I'd always known it might come to this—violence was the foundation upon which the Families had built their ivory towers, after all—but last night I'd been prepared to send Andrea on her way to prison where she could rot, watching as I took everything from her in the name of my parents, including her Heir.

I wasn't sorry in the slightest that the night had ended with a bullet in Andrea's head, but she was still Zach's mom. None of this was easy for him.

Noah and Bennett had crawled out of bed about an hour ago, and they'd both kissed me on the cheek before heading down to the gym a few floors below our home. Noah—still put out about being left behind last night—was itching to do some light working out to strengthen his injured leg, and Bennett had sworn on pain of no sex for a month that he would ensure Noah didn't overdo it.

I suspected they also wanted to give Zach some alone time with me, and I loved them very much for taking such wonderful care of their brother.

“Stop looking at me like that, Princess,” Zach mumbled, his gruff voice heavy with sleep.

“Like what?”

“Like you think I’m about to fall apart.”

He cracked an eye open to spear me with a *look*, but it took a lot more than an adorable, sleepy-eyed glare to intimidate me. “Zach,” I said softly, “we killed your mom last night. You found out some truly fucking terrible things about what happened to your dad. Your estranged aunt showed up, and we discovered she was the Shadow’s first major benefactor and has been scheming against Ferrero for a decade and a half. It’s okay to need a minute.”

He groaned, pulling me closer. I pressed my face into his chest as he wrapped his strong arms around me. “Baby girl, you need to understand something,” he whispered into my hair. “The moment your gorgeous eyes met mine at the Holiday Ball last semester—the moment I realized my Jojo had survived and come back to me—I knew my mom wasn’t long for this world. She was always going to be a danger to you, and there was no way I was losing you again.” He shifted us, tilting my face up to look him in those bottomless dark pools. “I’d thought it’d be you, or me, or even Frankie that did it, and I can’t say I’m not a little relieved that I wasn’t forced to commit matricide, but I’m not sorry she’s gone. She was a vile, soulless person. She hadn’t been my mom for a long time.”

I ran my fingers through his messy black hair. “And your dad?”

He sighed. “I think that’ll take a while to sink in. I’ll never know him—she took that from me. But, if I’m being honest, I’m not sorry I didn’t grow up hidden away in Switzerland, because I’d have lost you, Bennett, and Noah—the three most important people in my life.”

“But she wouldn’t have been able to hurt you,” I whispered. The thought of little Zach being tortured on the orders of his mother made me want to raise Andrea from the dead just so I could kill her again myself.

“Princess, I’d have let Ramon and his cronies break my ribs every damn day if it meant I ended up right where I am—holding you in my arms, in *our* home, so, *so* close to being free of the Families forever.”

I brought my lips to his, pouring every ounce of my love into my kiss. I nibbled on his lip ring, and he growled before he rolled me onto my back and slotted his trim hips between my legs. We made out, lazy and unhurried, while Zach ground his very aroused dick into the apex of my thighs with only his tight boxers and my little sleep shorts separating our heated flesh. I raked my nails up and down his back and reveled in the feel of his taut muscles under my fingertips.

"If you're trying to distract me, baby girl," he said as he ran his lips down the slope of my neck, "it's working. I approve of this plan."

"Can't I just want to fuck my boyfriend without an ulterior motive?" I asked, gasping as he yanked the straps of my silky tank top down to expose my breasts to the cool air.

He made himself at home there, sucking and licking with great enthusiasm. "Princess, you can fuck me with or without an ulterior motive, anytime, anywhere."

I rolled us, as much as it pained me to remove him from his diligent ministrations on my tits, and I straddled him, locking his muscular thighs between mine and threading my fingers through his.

I did want to distract him. I wanted him to feel free and loved and cherished. I wanted to show him in some small way what he meant to me, how much I knew he'd given to me by choosing me over his Family.

"You know," I said with a sly smile I hoped was extremely sexy, "it's odd that for some reason, *Noah's* the only one of my boyfriends who's had my mouth. Multiple times, even."

"Fuck," he groaned. "Don't remind me, Princess. I still dream about watching you suck him off while I fucked you. And don't think for a second Noah didn't brag to Bennett and me about your hot little student-teacher fuck in *excruciating* detail."

I flushed, the reminiscing adding fuel to the fire Zach had already stoked within me. I slid further down his thighs, peeling his tight gray boxers down until his thick dick sprang free. "So, how 'bout it, Ferrero?" I ran my palm lightly up and down his hard length, teasing him.

"Baby girl, I am so ready. Just stop torturing me."

I ducked down and got to work. Zach was thicker than Noah but not quite as long, but I gave his dick the methodical focus I gave

most tasks, and after a few minutes he was groaning as he gripped my hair and fucked up into my mouth with shallow, frantic thrusts.

"Fuck, Princess. *Fuck*," he panted, yanking me off of his cock. "That was fucking phenomenal. We gotta slow it down because I've decided I want to hit another milestone with you this morning."

"What—"

Suddenly, I was on my stomach, my shorts ripped from my body and tossed across the room and Zach's hulking, nearly naked body looming over me. He hiked my hips into the air, palmed the globes of my ass with his big hands, then spread me wide as he buried his face there.

"*Zach*," I whimpered as he laved his tongue over my tight hole. "Ugh, why does that feel so good?"

"Because I'm so good *at* it, Princess," he purred. He slipped a finger into my pussy, pumping lightly through the slickness. "You want to see if you can take me in this perfect ass? Only if you're feeling up to it, baby girl. We have forever to explore the limits of this body."

He slid his slick finger slowly into my ass, and I moaned as he began moving with slow, careful thrusts. "Do I ever back down from a challenge, Zach?" I asked, throwing a defiant glare over my shoulder only to be confronted with the image of my gorgeous, tattooed boyfriend kneeling behind me, his obsidian eyes hungry and filled with wonder as he watched his finger slide in and out of my ass.

It almost undid me on the spot.

"Oh, baby," he said as he finally tore his eyes from my ass. "This perfect ass is going to take my cock so fucking good."

He added a second finger, gently working me open, the bite of pain only driving me higher, and I trembled with the anticipation and the *need* for him to have me like this.

"Zach," I moaned. "I can do it. I can take it."

"Of course you can, baby girl." He pulled away, flopping onto his back and relaxing against my mountain of pillows. I watched as he leaned over to dig in the top drawer of my nightstand before returning to his pillow throne with a little plastic bottle of lube. With a sexy wink, he kicked his boxers all the way off, then he proceeded to

slather his still very erect cock with the lube, pumping his fist up and down as he held my greedy stare.

“C’mere, Princess,” he said, motioning to his lap. “Come take this cock.”

I did my best to sexy-crawl my way into his arms. When I reached him, he wrapped his non-lubed hand around my neck and pulled me in for a searing kiss that gave me everything—his love, his pride, his own need for me in this moment. Then he flipped me around, pressing my back to his hot, hard chest before he positioned my ass over his dick.

Slowly, I sank down. I pushed past the burn and, with determined effort, took him all the way to the hilt. He held me tight to his chest, whispering curse-laden praise into my ear. “Holy shit, Princess, this is fucking heaven. You’re such a fucking dream come true. Fuck me, I’m going to die like this. Right here, holding you in my arms, your ass clenched around my dick. *Fuck*.”

“Mmm,” I moaned, rocking my hips gently in his lap, exploring this erotic, foreign sensation. “Don’t die, Zach. Stay with me. Just like this. Fuck me just like this.”

His warm lips—and his cool lip ring—found my neck again. “Slow down, Princess. I don’t want to hurt you. We’re easing into this.”

“Easing into what?”

The bedroom door creaked open, and Noah ambled in, his limp barely noticeable as he toweled his wet hair from his post-workout shower. He wore some tight gray sweatpants and a white V-neck tee that molded to his sculpted chest.

His eyes landed on me, naked from the waist down, tits free of my tank top, reclining in Zach’s lap and impaled on his cock, and those baby blues went comically wide behind his glasses before an eager, sexy smile spread across his face.

“Oh, sweetheart, look at you,” he purred, dropping his towel and creeping onto the bed. “What has Ferrero gotten you into now?”

Zach chuckled in my ear. “Don’t be jealous, Hargraves. Aren’t you proud of our Princess?” He hooked his arms under my thighs and lifted, spreading me wider for Noah’s viewing.

“So proud,” he agreed as he crawled over the two of us. He leaned in, dropping a sweet kiss on my lips before he pulled away to

study me. “How are you feeling, sweet girl? You’re taking that cock in your ass so well. Such a good girl.”

I preened under his heated perusal. “I feel amazing, Noah. But Zach seems to think I’m breakable.”

Noah tutted. “Of course not, sweetheart. You’re the toughest.”

“The strongest,” Zach agreed.

“Ugh, then fuck me,” I whined. I was so wound up—so turned on, *needing* to come—I had no qualms about begging.

Noah grinned, scooting back to straddle Zach’s legs and position himself between my thighs. “Fuck me, look at this pussy. So needy. Has Zach been neglecting you?”

“*Noah*.” I was whining again, and I didn’t care.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart.” He dropped his head between my legs and shoved his tongue inside me.

“Oh fuck, oh my God,” I whimpered as Noah licked long stripes through my soaking folds, paying no mind at all to Zach’s dick buried in my ass.

“Excellent idea, man,” Zach said. “Let’s get Princess nice and relaxed.”

Noah hummed happily as he ate me out with enthusiasm. “Give us one, sweet girl. Then you can have my cock too. Would you like that?”

“Yes,” I hissed. “Noah, *please*.”

He groaned. “Fuck, I love it when you beg me. So good.” Then, finally, *mercifully*, he wrapped his lush lips around my clit and sucked hard, sinking two fingers into my pussy and driving them into me with fast, hard strokes until a wave of ecstasy melted me from the inside out.

“Oh fuck,” Zach groaned as I threw my head back onto his shoulder and screamed. “She’s fucking strangling my cock, man. I’m not gonna make it.”

After a quick kiss to my inner thigh, Noah sat back and speared Zach with a reproachful look. “Keep it together, Ferrero. We’re not done here.” He shucked his shirt, revealing his tanned, sculpted torso, and his sweatpants followed.

“Noah,” I said with a gasp as my eyes landed on the gauze wrapped tightly around his injured thigh, jolting my brain back online.

“Your leg! No—*no*—don’t pout at me. You can’t fuck me like this. You’ll hurt yourself.”

Noah, now completely naked, wrapped his long fingers around my ankle—which was still held aloft by Zach’s vice grip around my thighs—and he pressed a kiss to my calf. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that sounded like you were giving me orders in bed, sweetheart.”

“Oooh,” Zach said. “Bad girl.”

I elbowed him, and he grunted before retaliating with a nip to my ear.

Noah just cocked a blond eyebrow at me before he crawled to the edge of the bed and opened the same drawer from which Zach had produced the lube. He rummaged around for a few seconds before he pulled out a handheld vibrator with a long handle and a blunt, round head. Then he returned to his spot between my legs.

He waved the toy at me with a triumphant grin. “I’ll just employ a little extra assistance. Won’t have to overexert myself to make you cream all over my cock and choke the life out of Zach’s again. Will that be satisfactory, sweetheart?”

I gaped at him. “When the hell did you guys find the time to stash all these sex toys in my nightstand?”

Zach snickered in my ear. “Spencer thought of everything, baby girl. Let’s have Noah snap a picture of you taking both of our cocks, and I’ll have it made into a thank you card for him.”

Noah laughed, now leisurely running his dick through the slippery mess between my thighs. “How about it, Jojo?” He dipped the tip in, teasing me. “Show us you can take us both. Own us both just like you already do, mind, body, and fucking soul.”

I met those hungry blue eyes one more time just as I felt Zach’s soft, reverent kiss behind my ear. “Yes,” I said with a little moan. “Do it, Noah.”

He sank all the way into me, and all three of us groaned in unison, the sound so loud, it echoed off the tiles of my en suite bathroom. Noah began to rock his hips, grinding his dick deep inside me as Zach held me tight, pulsing his own dick upward in gentle thrusts.

“Fuck me, that is a trip,” Zach rasped. “I can feel him inside you, Princess.”

Noah pressed the now vibrating toy to my clit, picking up his pace. “How’s it feel, sweetheart?”

“So fucking good,” I moaned. I was bordering on incoherent. I was so full, the pressure an exquisite torture and the vibration on my clit sending my inner walls into a mind-melting spasm. “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” I chanted. “I’m so close. So close.”

And then the bedroom door burst open once again.

Noah tossed a look over his shoulder. “Perfect timing, Spencer,” he called between labored breaths, then he turned those heated blue eyes back to me. “Bennett’s here, sweet girl. Now you can come for all of us.”

I gasped as Bennett slammed the door and stalked to the side of the bed just as Noah and Zach both upped their pace once again.

“Holy fuck, Angel,” Bennett rasped, his mossy eyes hooded with lust as he raked them over my trembling body. “Are you taking both these assholes’ cocks? You’re so fucking hot right now, baby. Jesus Christ.”

“Bennett, touch yourself,” I demanded. Or was I begging again?

His nostrils flared, and he pulled his huge, already half-hard dick from his track pants. He began to stroke it with long, angry pulls as he watched his best friends fuck me within an inch of my life. I kept my eyes on Bennett and my mind on the two cocks moving in sync inside me.

Within a minute, I was gone.

I felt my body clench around them as I shrieked at the ceiling, a chorus of deep, guttural groans following me over the edge.

When I came back to earth, Zach and Noah still held me tight, both panting hard, and Bennett loomed over me, kneeling at my side as he admired the mess he’d made on my stomach.

“That was beautiful, sweetheart,” Noah said with a happy, satiated smile. “Bennett and I made the right call leaving you and Zach to some alone time this morning if this is what you two are going to get up to while we’re gone.”

“Princess takes such good care of me,” Zach purred in my ear. “She loves me.”

“I do,” I said with a big sleepy sigh. “I love all of you.”

Bennett ripped his shirt over his head and wiped me clean while I stretched languidly in Zach’s arms, and I took the opportunity to ogle Bennett’s broad tattooed chest and those gorgeous angel wings as he worked. When he finished, he tossed the shirt onto the floor and reached down to caress my cheek with his big hand. “I hope you know what you’ve gotten yourself into now, Angel. We’re going to own every piece of you. You’re *ours*.”

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed in agreement before turning to snuggle into Zach’s shoulder. “Always have been.”

And now we were so close to finally being *free.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JOLIE



"Drink this, baby girl," Zach said as he handed me a steaming mug of coffee. "You need to recharge."

"I am perfectly fine," I retorted as I accepted the mug. I was on the living room couch with Bennett, snuggled tightly into his side, while the other two had just finished puttering around the kitchen to throw together some breakfast. We were all clean and dressed in our Sunday loungewear, and Zach had snapped at each of us at least once for giving him "pity eyes."

"Sure you are, Princess," Zach replied, smirking at me as he flopped onto the couch next to me. "Thoroughly used, but perfectly fine."

Noah slid a tray of bagels onto the table before dropping into one of our cushy armchairs. He smiled fondly at me as he sipped on his own coffee. "Boy am I glad I left Bennett downstairs to bother Kara while I came back to check on you two."

Bennett scowled, though he was currently rubbing sweet little circles on my thigh with his thumb. "Yes, at least one of us was doing something productive while the three of you were *fucking*. A lot of shit went down last night, and we have to be on top of it."

"You saying Noah and I fucking our girl through two orgasms together wasn't productive?" Zach quipped.

Bennett normally would've shot him a withering glare for that, but instead he only glanced at Zach over the top of my head with a patient sort of look.

Zach huffed, losing his cocky smirk to glare back at Bennett. "I said to cut that shit out. I'm not that fucking breakable. I'm *happy* my mom's dead because now Princess is that much safer. And I've had fifteen years to mourn my dad. I'm *fine*."

I reached for his hand and tucked it into mine, then I redirected Bennett before he could argue. "What did you find out from Kara? They made it in time to the ship carrying the trafficking victims, right?"

"They did," Bennett replied. "Max and I downloaded the details we were able to find in Andrea's records while we were locked in the office, and Kara got on the road with her team immediately. They apparently also called the Coast Guard, so the shitty merc team Andrea had meeting the boat in Port Santo Carlo didn't stand a chance."

I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd known before we went to bed last night that our team had likely left with enough time to catch the boat before it was unloaded and those poor people disappeared into a nightmare, but I'd wanted to hear confirmation that everything went according to plan. "And everyone they rescued from the boat is okay?"

Bennett cleared his throat. "Twenty-nine girls and four boys, all between the ages of fifteen and nineteen. Scared, malnourished, and a little roughed up, but yes, everyone is okay. Kara and Julie had the foresight to bring a mostly female team, and apparently that went a long way toward making the victims feel safer."

I whipped out my phone and typed out a text to Zepp. "I'm going to make sure Knight is funding anything and everything they need. Housing, school, jobs, travel back home if they have a safe family to return to…."

Noah's affectionate smile appeared over the top of his coffee cup. "It's being taken care of, sweetheart, but a message from the boss never hurts to make sure things are moving along… efficiently."

Bennett squeezed my thigh and pressed a soft kiss to the top of my head, then he continued, "Silver and Marcus stayed up last night

to sort through the rest of the documents we dropped off with them. They've contacted the Feds and the European authorities with the names of Andrea's most prolific buyers of stolen artifacts."

Zach hummed. "Good. I suppose cutting off that supply of cash to Ferrero no longer really matters, but I enjoy knowing those greedy bastards are all probably about to get raided. That'll ruin someone's Sunday golf game."

"Unfortunately, Andrea didn't have the names of the buyers for this latest shipment," Bennett added. "She used a 'broker' with a codename, but Kara tells me that Julie managed to get a real first name and the contact information of the broker out of the guy in charge of the merc team receiving the boat." He shuddered against me. "She says Julie's been spending a little too much time with Frankie lately."

I wrinkled my nose and saw Noah do the same, while Zach just chuckled. "Frankie is an excellent teacher, believe it or not."

"I believe it," I muttered, remembering Zach's skill with a scalpel. "So do Donavan's balls."

Zach grinned, shooting me a sexy wink that told me he, too, was probably reminiscing about our first time together, before he looked at Bennett. "Did we call in the skin broker or are we sending our own team?"

"Kara said it's up to the boss but that the team would very much like to take this one in house."

"In house it is," I said, grabbing my phone to add that to my instructions to Zepp.

"One last thing, Angel," Bennett said. I pulled my gaze from my phone and looked up into his intense mossy green eyes. "Andrea hadn't taken a weapons shipment since the day we blew apart her Enforcer team, but apparently, she'd finally assembled enough of one to schedule another run. Dom's going to take that one."

My smile was grim. "Yeah. That'll be cathartic for him, I suppose."

I leaned back into the couch cushions, my hands on Bennett and Zach and my eyes on Noah as we sat in silence for a few minutes, each of us contemplating the true end of the Ferrero empire.

Now there was only one Family remaining that stood against me, and it had always been the toughest nut to crack.

My phone buzzed in my lap, and I swiped to answer on speakerphone when I saw it was Zepp calling.

“Hey, boss lady,” he drawled before the crack of a soda can sounded. “I’ve got some news for your boy Ferrero.”

“Oh yeah?” I replied. “Where’s Marcus?”

Zepp snorted. “The little fucker’s taking a nap. You lot kept him super busy last night, and Silver threw him out of the command center for the day anyway. She’s pissed at him for keeping some very handy tech from the rest of the team.”

Noah chuckled. “Those two are still… working out the kinks.”

“What’s the news for Zach?” I asked.

The clicking of his keyboard sounded through the phone, then Zepp said, “The office of the Ferrero liaison was contacted this morning.”

“That means Marcus got an email,” Zach supplied.

“Right,” Zepp said. “The email was from your mom’s lawyer, Ferrero. It appears you were still her Heir, so what’s left of the Ferrero Family jewels is now yours.”

Zach’s eyes widened before he blew out a breath, sagging back into the couch. “I guess I’m not surprised. She thought I’d come back eventually.”

“And so, we await your instructions, oh Head of Ferrero,” Zepp said, and I could envision the mocking flourish of his hand.

Zach looked at me, a dark brow raised in question. “What do you think, baby girl?”

“It’s up to you, Zach,” I said gently. “Sell what you don’t want. Keep what you do.”

He was thoughtful. “Zepp, have it all moved under the Ferrero arm of Knight for now. And have all the shitty people who are current tenants of Ferrero Tower notified that they have thirty days to get the fuck out. I want to do something useful with that thing, like Noah’s doing with his.”

“I will leave detailed instructions for Marcus when he wakes up,” Zepp replied with a devious chuckle, his fingers flying over the keys again. “He’ll be so thrilled with his to-do list.”

“Tell him I’ll give him another raise if he can manage to do it without bitching,” Zach said. “And everything’s cleaned up in the

Ferrero penthouse and the press release is ready to go tomorrow?"

He paused his loud typing. "It is. Your cleanup crew is the most professional I've ever seen, and Jojo's lawyers got on top of the statement to both the law enforcement and the public when Silver woke them up this morning at about four a.m."

I winced, making a mental note that pretty much everyone on my team deserved a muffin basket and a raise after this weekend.

"And Zepp?" Bennett rumbled next to me.

"Yes, Spencer?"

"Has there been any further progress on our project?"

He sighed. "No. Your dad's tech team is good. I'm starting to think we should just try to buy them off instead of attempting to slip in the way we are."

"Won't work," Bennett said in his unaffected monotone. "I'm sure there are threats to their lives or their families hanging over their heads that aren't worth any amount of money to them."

"We'll figure it out, Bennett," I said with a comforting squeeze of his hand.

"That's the spirit, team," Zepp said with faux exuberance. "Alright, I'm out. Don't bother me this afternoon unless it's an emergency—the Knicks are playing."

He signed off before any of us could comment on his shitty taste in basketball teams.



It only took about sixty seconds from the moment our press release went live at eight o'clock Monday morning for the student phones in the Academy's dining hall to start lighting up.

One by one they looked at their screens, then eyes widened, jaws dropped, and their wary stares hit our table, where the boys and I sat with Mari and the rest of our friends, casually enjoying our breakfast like it was just the beginning of another stimulating week at Holywell.

"Ah, I see the news is out," Mari said lightly. She picked up her own phone and began to scroll. "Let's just see what the great minds

at Knight have come up with for this latest little incident, shall we?"

Mari was up-to-date on the gory details and had apparently taken *Francisco* to the spa again yesterday afternoon to distract him from any "weird feelings he may have about the death of his shitty sister." Zach did try to assure her that Frankie didn't have feelings in the traditional sense of the word, but she'd waved him off like he didn't know what he was talking about.

"Andrea Ferrero had a heart attack?" Hannah Langford asked, shooting a very dubious look down the table in our direction.

"Stress," Zach replied with a shrug. "Things hadn't been going particularly well for her since Jolie Knight returned from the grave."

"Uh-huh," Hannah said slowly. Her shrewd emerald gaze darted around the table to look at the others—John Tyler, Devin, Raiford, and her friend Nick Ruiz, whose Tier Two family's boutique fitness empire was now majority owned by Noah's arm of Knight. Not a one of them looked up from their plates, uninterested in asking any further questions. Hannah's stare returned to Zach. "Well, then—my condolences, Ferrero."

"Appreciated but not necessary, Langford."

Mari hummed in amusement. "'Zachary Ferrero, the new head of the Ferrero Family, requests privacy at this time. A *closed* service will be held for Mrs. Ferrero that will be limited to friends and relatives only.' Que listos, my friends."

The chatter throughout the hall began to intensify to its normal level. From the equal mix of shocked, pitying looks that were being sent Zach's way and the terrified ones being sent at me, it appeared the student body was about evenly split on whether they believed the story, or they thought I'd finally killed the bitch.

I kept an easy smile affixed to my face—a thing that came much easier to me these days now that I had all three pieces of my heart back with me. My classmates could speculate all they wanted about my murderous tendencies.

That thought made me chuckle, and I turned to the table across the way to glance at Harper, Chad, and their dwindling group of cronies, letting a touch of psycho slip into my smile. Chad was furiously texting someone, his square jaw grinding in irritation, while Harper did her best to sneer in my direction.

But even she couldn't keep the tremble out of her hand, her healing wrist now wrapped in a soft splint.

That's right, Jansen. Fuck around and find out.

Again.

"I see that, Angel," Bennett said, his chiding tone more amused than serious. "Stop making crazy eyes at the sheep. If they still don't know not to fuck with you, then they'll deserve what they get."

His voice was loud enough to carry across the way, and Harper's scandalized gasp at being called "the sheep" by her beloved was the cherry on top of my already stellar mood after vanquishing my enemy and being lovingly double teamed by two of my sexy boyfriends.

"Change of subject," Zach announced. "I don't think we should let all of the… stuff we have going on distract us from the fact that we are coming up on a couple of important birthdays."

I caught Noah's blue-eyed stare from across the table, and my whole body warmed at the memories I now welcomed with open arms instead of trying to smother because they once brought me so much pain. I smiled from ear to ear as I whispered, "Hey, birthday twin."

"Hey yourself, birthday twin," he replied, his own sunshine smile lighting up the entire damn room. "Wanna have a joint party, for old time's sake?"

Noah's birthday was March 31st; mine was April 1st—this coming Friday and Saturday, respectively. When we were growing up, sometimes our parents—or our nannies—would split the labor and throw us a single birthday party.

I'd never minded sharing the spotlight, and neither had Noah—even when I'd insisted on picking the theme.

He'd always let me.

"Only if you'll dress up as Kristoff again so I can be Elsa," I replied, teasing him.

His grin only grew wider, but I saw the emotion hit him suddenly. He wiped his misty eyes under his glasses. "Our last party together. God, you made us watch *Frozen* so many times that year."

Bennett gave me such a warm, fond smile that even I had to blink back tears. Zach clapped Noah on the shoulder, giving us both an

excited grin. “Excellent. I think we can throw together a little something by this weekend. Mari?”

She tittered excitedly. “Sí, not a problem at all. I presume budget is not an issue?”

I frowned. “I mean, no, but you don’t need to do anything big deal.”

Everyone at the table laughed like I’d told a funny joke. “You’ve been living on the Southside too long, chica,” Mari said. “You are the richest person in this City! Luckily Max knows how to dream bigger. I’ve already texted him, and he has suggested a yacht.”

“What?” *Max, what the fuck….*

“Who here has a yacht we can use?” she inquired around the table.

Five hands went up, including Noah’s.

“Really, though?” I asked. “That is not a *little* something—”

“Not another word out of you, chica. Noah, you’re with me, yes?”

His smile for me was extremely smug and a little naughty before he turned to Mari. “I’m with you, Mari. I’ll procure us a birthday boat.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

NOAH



"Marcus, I don't care that it's Tuesday morning and I have class in half an hour. I will drive my Ferrari down to the tower and punch you in your annoyingly fucking punchable face if you do not stop calling me for every little goddamn thing and acting like we don't have people for this. Bother Rocky, for fuck's sake."

I suppressed my amused smile at Zach's tirade. I knew firsthand the stressors of assuming an entire Family empire, but I'd laid the groundwork and had made small moves for years before Jolie returned to steal my heart and the rest of Hargraves for me. Zach had it all dropped in his lap forty-eight hours ago, and it appeared Marcus was enjoying ruffling his feathers about all the big *important* decisions that needed to be made by the new head of the Ferrero Family.

Zach hung up his phone with an annoyed jab of his finger before glancing at me where I lounged on our leather couch, lazily scrolling through my own messages. "Oh, I'm glad you think this is funny," he groused as he shoved his tablet into his messenger bag. Apparently, I hadn't hidden my amusement after all. "Running the Family is just sooo easy for you."

I shrugged. "Purge the shitty people and keep the good ones. It mostly runs itself. You've only got the dregs to sift through anyway.

Our girl sorted the rest for you already."

"True," he said with a wistful grin, no doubt thinking of our avenging angel. "She's the best."

Bennett strode into the room, his brown hair perfectly styled and his suit pressed to perfection, as usual. "She is," he agreed. "And she will have our balls if we're not downstairs to get her from her dorm in time for a full breakfast."

A loud buzzing sounded from his pocket, and his jaw tensed.

"How many is that?" I asked.

"Eleven," he replied tersely, clearly at his wit's end. "And five from that bitch Elise, like he thought I'd somehow take her call but not his."

Zach dropped onto the couch next to me, throwing his head back onto the cushion and pinching his brow as he muttered, "Let's just satisfy his burning curiosity. Then he can sit and think about the writing on his own wall."

I nodded at Bennett. "Might as well. You up for it?"

He bristled. "I'm not afraid of my fucking father. I just no longer care to speak to him about anything, ever." His phone began vibrating in his hand again, and he rolled his eyes to the vaulted ceiling of our dorm living room. "Fine," he grumbled before answering the phone with a furious swipe of his thumb.

"Bennett Spencer!" the voice of James Spencer barked through the phone's speaker.

"Father," Bennett drawled, bored.

"I don't know what you and that little *bitch* think you're playing at. Andrea Ferrero did not just *happen* to drop dead of a heart attack on the same night the Knight whore was spotted at her fucking gala!"

"It is an interesting coincidence, isn't it, Father? You know, Zach's right here, if you want me to pass along your condolences."

He sputtered, "You—you *children* cannot just go around murdering the heads of the Four Families!"

"Scared, Father?" Bennett asked smoothly, a tiny smile quirking at his lips.

"Is that a *threat*, son?" James spat.

"It's a promise, Father. It was you who taught me that we should do *anything* to protect our Family, the murder of members of the

other Families expressly included."

"*Bennett*—"

"And Jolie Knight is the center of my Family, Father. It no longer includes you, and if you're a threat to *my* Family, I will remove you from the board. Stop fucking calling me."

He hung up the phone. Zach and I watched warily as he slid it gingerly into the pocket of his suit jacket before straightening his spine and rolling his shoulders with a calming breath. Then he glanced down at us, a relaxed, almost placid look on his face. "What are you two getting Angel for her birthday? Her birthstone is diamond, and I'm thinking of returning a nice little chunk of Alastia to her as a necklace."

I couldn't help the huge grin that spread across my face. Bennett had finally freed himself from his intrinsic need to please his father, and I was so damn proud of him.



For a few days, we were able to just be college students again.

College students who were now running three of the Four Families and very behind on our homework.

Zach was able to transition the bulk of Ferrero into the capable hands we already had within Knight, and after Frankie assisted in running off the most unsavory people still attached to businesses he wanted to keep, everything began to hum right along. Zach even talked Rocky into overseeing security at the Euphoria Club, and he'd promptly booted the slimiest clientele off the list and handpicked a crop of new bouncers.

My dad attempted to call me twice after the news of Andrea's death broke, and unlike Bennett, I didn't feel the need to clue him in about our role in it. He was still in Thailand, and Silver dropped me a note midweek, informing me that he'd actually called my *mom* and asked her for a loan.

She undoubtedly laughed in his face and then yelled at him for losing his entire empire to his son and Jolie Knight.

Our Jojo seemed mostly content. Getting back into the grind of class, homework, and crew practice was always good for her, as was getting thoroughly fucked by whichever one of us was lucky enough to end up in her bed on a particular night and brave enough to be subjected to Mari's scathing annoyance regarding the "shrieking sex noises" the next morning. But as the end of the week approached, I could tell that her begrudging excitement for our birthday party had been infected by her growing frustration that we'd still made no progress on crippling Spencer once and for all.

Bennett was starting to get moody about it, too, but we were used to his shit.

Spencer was flagging but remained stubbornly resilient, the white-collar conglomerate of banks, hedge funds, private equity, and venture capital groups able to hold strong, diversify, and bring on outside money that was insulated from City politics and still unaware of how terrified they should be of Jolie Knight.

Silver, Zepp, Marcus, and their entire team had prepared a nice package for James Spencer, but we needed a way to deliver it.

But now it was Saturday night, and we were all going to put aside our schoolwork, work-work, and nefarious plans to have some goddamn fun for my twentieth and Jojo's nineteenth birthday.

"This is not a *little* something!" Jolie barked at the three of us as she gestured wildly at the three-hundred-foot, three-story superyacht currently parked at the docks of the Academy's boathouse.

"What do you mean, sweetheart?" I asked innocently as I dragged her along the dock by our intertwined hands. "You don't like the Contessa? She was always my dad's favorite."

"Didn't we take this one on vacation once in like, fourth grade?" Zach asked as he and Bennett trailed along behind us.

I chuckled. "No, that was the Silver Lion. Dad only took his favorite yacht out for his stable of mistresses, and we were not invited on those trips."

"Lovely," Jojo muttered as she craned her neck to take in the full breadth of the Contessa. "I'm thrilled we're having our birthday party on Peter's fuckboat, Noah."

"I had it thoroughly sanitized," I replied, before I said, with a little more bite, "Relax and enjoy the night for me, please, sweet girl."

She let out a tiny moan and relaxed against my side, which got a knowing snicker out of Zach and a scoff from Bennett.

“Ahoy, mateys!”

Our attention was pulled to the top of the boarding ladder at the entrance to the Contessa, where a line of students waiting to board had formed as they went through our security—comprised tonight of some of the younger members of the Shadows or the Knight Enforcer squad.

Max waved excitedly at us, and I narrowed my eyes in his direction. “What the fuck is he wearing?”

The asshole had on what looked like a sailor outfit, complete with tiny shorts, a navy scarf, and a ridiculous white hat. He also had several handguns strapped to his body and was twirling a knife through his fingers.

Jojo elbowed me before she waved back at him. “It’s very nautical, Noah. You and Zach tried to get me to wear a fucking *bikini* to this thing.”

We had. The spring night air was warmer than usual, and we wanted to stare at that tight body all night long, but Jojo had rolled her eyes at us, then Bennett had put his big possessive foot down, anyway.

She compromised with her little denim shorts that showed off her long legs and a cropped T-shirt that revealed the top of her toned stomach. The three of us were in designer jeans and dress shirts, or a too-tight white V-neck if your name was Zach Ferrero.

We left our shoes along the dock with the dozens of others already abandoned there, and I led us past the line to board—obviously, since this was *my* fucking boat—before we all clambered onto the main deck.

Max smirked at me, clapping me on the shoulder like we were good buddies because *ugh*, we fucking *were* now. “This thing is *sick*, Nigel. Martinez already gave me the tour. It’d be so killer if I could use this for my graduation party. Bruce would totally let us park it at the Boathouse.”

Jojo gave him a fond smile, hugging him as she cooed, “Anything you want, Maxy.” She tossed a look at me over her shoulder. “Right, Noah?”

Zach snorted, and I returned her look with my most charming smile. “Of course, sweetheart.”

Max could have the Silver Lion.

“I can’t believe you guys talked Martinez into captaining the yacht for this ridiculous party,” Jojo gushed as she looked around the expansive deck. It was packed with our classmates already, drinks in hands as they spread out around the various tables and lounging areas. We’d been diplomatic about the invitations, opening it to the entire student body on a first-come basis until the yacht was at capacity.

“Oh, he is so fucking excited about it,” Max replied. “He was in the Navy, but they sure as shit weren’t sailing one of these babies. We’re going on our little voyage down the river as soon as everyone’s loaded.”

Bennett eyed Max. “My mom is with your parents?”

Max grinned. “Relax, Big Man. Dad’s cooking for the ladies tonight.”

Bennett smiled contentedly at that, and I caught Jojo’s rough swallow like her mouth had just gone dry as she stared at his serene face. He said, “I doubt she’s ever had a man cook for her. That’s really nice.”

It was. Those three were the only parents we all had left, and I was glad they were safe and happy.

I held my elbow out to my birthday twin. “Shall we? Mari made sure we had a little VIP area reserved for us up front.”

We made our way around to the bow, but not before we took a pass through the grand ballroom, where the DJ already had quite the party going, and the yacht’s bar, where Zach helped himself to three bottles of expensive champagne.

The sundeck out on the bow of the ship was crowded, but the largest white couch had been roped off. Mari and Hannah Langford sat primly in the center, drinking champagne and giggling. Max flung himself onto a cushion next to Mari, and Bennett and Zach veered toward the additional bar located on this deck.

“Finally!” Mari shouted, motioning for us to sit. “Chica! What do you think? Your boyfriends have such fun toys.”

“It’s great, Mari,” Jojo replied with a genuine smile, tugging me down to sit next to her on the couch. “Thank you for putting this together.” She turned to look at me with those mesmerizing aquamarines, so soft with her love for me now and such a stark contrast to how sharp and cold they’d been when she first came back to us. “And thank you, birthday twin.”

“Love you, sweetheart,” I murmured, stealing a kiss that quickly turned heated. I sipped her little moans like they were the glass of champagne that had been shoved into my hand, and I thought this was the best fucking birthday I’d ever had.

“Hey, you two,” Max hollered from the other side of the couch. “Get one of the many rooms below deck if you’re going to paw at each other. That’s my *sister*, Neal.”

I groaned against Jojo’s lips, and I felt her smile against mine before she pulled away and tucked herself under my arm. That settled me, and I took a moment to sip my actual champagne and take in the view of the City lights and the clear night stars as they reflected back at me in the glassy black surface of the river.

After a few peaceful minutes, Jojo stiffened under my arm.

“What is it, sweetheart?”

Her eyes had narrowed dangerously as she scowled in the direction of the bar. I followed her glare to where Bennett remained chatting with the Robicheaux twins while Zach had just turned to head this way with his hands full of drinks. An unfamiliar girl—who was, in fact, in a purple bikini—slinked along behind him and wore a very determined look on her face.

“Who’s that bitch?” Jojo asked, her light, causal tone fooling no one.

Hannah’s evil grin did not improve the situation. “I believe that is one of the Robicheaux twins’ cousins. Definitely not from here, just visiting, has no idea she’s two seconds away from a knife to the throat.”

“Don’t encourage her, Langford,” I admonished, then I had to glare at Max because his giddy fucking smile was also not helping.

Zach made it to us, his lazy smirk indicating he was oblivious to the impending danger, and he unloaded his drinks onto the table with a flourish and a wink at Jojo.

“Hey there,” bikini girl purred as she reached Zach’s side, and she slithered a hand up his bicep. “I’m Nikki, and I couldn’t let another second go by without talking to you. You are the hottest guy I’ve ever seen, and I’d love to get to know you. *All* of you,” she added, licking her lips as she looked him up and down.

Zach was certainly an expert at having women throw themselves at him, but even he couldn’t help the flash of alarm that crossed his face before he smoothly removed Nikki’s claws from his arm. “I’m flattered,” he replied as he pasted on the cocky smirk of the Ferrero Heir. “But I’m not looking for new friends at the moment.”

I rubbed Jojo’s back as she watched this with a cool detachment that scared the shit out of me.

Nikki only moved a little closer, fluttering her lashes and waving her rather large boobs at him. “Oh, but I wasn’t suggesting we be *friends*, baby. I will be anything you fucking want.”

Jolie cleared her throat. “Read the room, Nikki. Zach wants you to fuck off.”

She gasped, whipping her scandalized stare to where Jojo sat, tense but calm, and still snuggled into my side. “No one asked you, bitch,” she sneered.

“Oh fuck,” Max said with a cackle.

“Uh-oh,” Mari hummed at the same time.

But Jojo just smiled at her. “You probably *should* ask me, Nikki. That’s my boyfriend you’re pawing at.”

She let out a derisive laugh. “Sure he is. I saw you making out with the blond hottie you’re sitting next to. But go on.”

I shot Zach a pointed look that invited him to step in at any moment here, but he’d crossed his arms lazily over his chest, his eyes ping-ponging between the two women like it was the final match at Wimbledon.

Jojo calmly set her drink down on the low table in front of us before she stood up and smoothed her shorts.

“Sweetheart, be reasonable,” I said, the warning clear in my tone.

She turned to give me an innocent smile before pressing a sweet kiss to my cheek, then she stepped around the coffee table to where Zach stood next to Nikki. Her lip curled in utter contempt as Jojo melted into Zach’s arms.

He beamed at our girl, pulling her into a deep kiss before releasing her and wisely exiting the arena to flop onto the couch next to me.

Nikki rolled her eyes. “Cute. Are you fucking both of them? Good for you. But it’s not like *Zach* will want to limit himself to just *you*. I’ll show him a better time, and I won’t be pumped full of another guy’s cum while I do it.”

“Oh shit,” Zach murmured.

I glared at him. “Oh, now you’re catching on?”

Jolie moved with her cat-like speed, shoving Nikki backward until she was trapped against the side of the boat right next to our couch. She squealed and clutched at the railing behind her, and Jojo eyed her with complete disdain as she wrapped her hand around Nikki’s thin neck and squeezed.

“Listen up, you dense bitch,” Jojo said, her voice low. “Zach Ferrero is my boyfriend. The blond hottie, Noah Hargraves, is also my boyfriend. And that big guy over there”—she jerked her head at Bennett, who had just wandered over from the bar and stood watching this with raised brows—“is Bennett Spencer. Wanna guess what he is to me?”

“You,” Nikki wheezed, “are a crazy whore.”

“Fine, I’ll tell you,” Jojo said with a dramatic sigh. “Bennett’s my boyfriend too. Those three belong to me and *only* me for the rest of fucking time. I’ll give you a pass, since you’re not from around here and you don’t have a goddamn clue who you’ve just tried to tangle with, but I suggest you turn that skinny ass around and keep your eyes off my boys for the rest of the night.”

Nikki’s face had flushed an angry red, and she struggled against Jolie’s hold on her, but she was no match for our warrior queen.

“You’re… fucking… kidding yourself,” she spat. “Men… like them… would never. Settle for… *sharing*.”

Jolie’s smile was evil. “They have and they do.” Then she leaned in as if to whisper conspiratorially. “And you’re right, Nikki—they *love* pumping me full of their cum. It’s a competition, and the winner is always me.”

Hot arousal shot through me, and Zach and I both groaned. So did Max—for different reasons.

“Damn, get it, Knight,” Hannah said with a whistle.

Nikki screeched, swiping at Jojo. “Fuck you. I don’t know who the fuck you think you are, but you’re a deluded, disgusting *slut*.”

“This is *my* party, you dumb cunt,” Jojo said evenly. “And you’re no longer on the guest list.”

Then she dumped Nikki over the side of the boat and into the brisk waters of the Obsidian below.

Yep, best fucking birthday I’ve ever had.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

JOLIE



I leaned against the railing of the Contessa as we sailed south on the river. The warm breeze tickled at the strands of hair that had come loose from my ponytail, and I breathed a contented sigh as my gaze landed on the soft yellow streetlights of Olde Town and the hulking log cabin structure that was Bruce's Boathouse.

Noah was entertaining well-wishers a few yards away at the bar while Zach lounged on the couch like the lazy prince he was, chatting amiably with Mari and John Tyler. Max had attracted a gaggle of girls and was enjoying himself nearby, his keen dark eyes popping up to check on me at regular intervals out of longstanding habit.

Bennett stood next to me, his back against the railing, sipping his bourbon and watching me intently as he always had ever since I'd stormed out of the dining hall on that very first day of school.

"Gonna scold me, Bennett?" I asked, looking up at him with a wry smile.

He tried to keep a serious face, but the corner of his lip quirked up as he said, "I know better than that, Angel. That girl's lucky she only took a bath in the river instead of having her entire trust fund wiped away before she did a stint in jail or something."

Very true. Poor Nikki had only had to swim about ten feet to the dock, where her unfortunate cousin Hans—who'd bolted off the boat

at the first sound of her scream—had yanked her out of the water and dragged her off to the locker rooms in an angry huff. Hatcher had rushed over to apologize profusely to me for his cousin's rude behavior, then he went right back to enjoying himself again somewhere on the dance floor inside the yacht's grand ballroom. I could feel the thump of the music rattling the deck under my bare feet.

"Mmm," I replied, turning back to the water. "She *touched* Zach, Bennett. And she called me a slut a few times, though I guess if I threw anyone who's ever called me a slut off this yacht, about half our classmates would be in the river right now."

He chuckled, all low and sexy. "It was unnecessary, Angel, but it was also hot as fuck. Zach just texted Noah and me to inform us he still has a hard-on."

I snorted. My boys were so fucking horny. "You know, if Joanna Miller had thrown a rich girl off a boat, you would've had her kicked out of school."

"Probably, but I'd have still thought it was hot as fuck."

He moved up behind me, then I felt something heavy and cold settle along my collarbone before his warm hands brushed the back of my neck. He leaned down to lay a kiss behind my ear. "Happy birthday, Angel."

I lifted the necklace with a finger to take a look, and I was met with a chain consisting entirely of tiny cherry blossoms woven together to create a vine, each flower inlaid with a large round diamond set in rose gold.

"Bennett Spencer!" I gasped. "You did not. This had to have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars."

His grin was smug. "You're worth so much more than that, Angel, but I knew you'd throw a fit if I went into the seven figures for your present."

"You've already spent so much on the penthouse, you ridiculous man. And you wouldn't let me pay you back."

He spun me around to face him, crowding me up against the railing. "You pay me back every single day, Angel," he rasped. "By coming back to me. By being mine. And I just want to be worthy of you."

I grasped his face and pulled him into a fierce kiss, which he returned with hungry fervor. “Of course you’re worthy of me,” I murmured against his lips. “I love you. You’re a part of me, Bennett. We’ve been over this.”

He smiled, so free and so happy that it made my heart soar, and I pressed my entire body into his as he kissed me again.

“Ahem.” Mari’s voice sounded from behind Bennett. “I’d say take this below deck to whichever room you four have reserved that hasn’t already been defiled by the horde of deviants on this boat, but I have had *no* time with the birthday girl. Hand her over, Spencer.”

He growled, squeezing me tighter and continuing to stroke my tongue languidly with his, and I melted into him and became one with him for a few more blissful seconds before I extricated myself in the name of friendship.

“Sorry, girl,” I said to Mari. “Wanna get fresh drinks and go exploring?”

She marched forward to grab my hand, her wide-legged, navy-blue playsuit swishing in the soft breeze as she went. “Yes! Tell your biggest, broodiest boyfriend goodbye.”

Bennett huffed, rolling his eyes, but he popped one more kiss on the top of my head before Mari dragged me away. “Have fun, Angel.”



Twenty minutes later, I had something fizzy in my hand that smelled like ginger and rum and had finally escaped the dance floor where the exuberant crowd had trapped me like a riptide until I’d managed to work my way out.

I’d left Max at the main bar to bask in the attention of the hot bartender, and Mari and I were now nosing around the much quieter aft deck at the back of the yacht. There were a few low cushioned seating areas, but apparently no one wanted to hang out back here, since it was so far from the bars.

“Do you need to take a load off?” Mari asked me with a teasing grin. “Carrying around all those diamonds you’ve got around your neck must be *so* taxing.”

“It really is,” I lamented, dropping onto a cushion. “As is destroying my enemies and keeping three sexy men satisfied. I’m very tired, Mari.”

“I know, chica. The struggles we must bear.”

We laughed, but before either of us could make ourselves comfortable, the sounds of a struggle hit my ears.

I bolted to my bare feet and pushed through the nearby sliding door that led to a small empty lounge.

A shriek sounded through a closed door at the bottom of a narrow staircase just inside the entrance.

“Stop fighting me, you redheaded bitch.”

“Fuck you! Get off me!”

A wave of panic shot through my veins. I knew both of those voices.

I hurried down the stairs and yanked hard on the door, finding it locked.

“Is that… Chad? And *Hannah*?” Mari asked in a horrified whisper. “What do we do?”

I jerked my head at the little designer backpack Mari’d insisted I wear to this thing instead of my trusty black one. “Can you get my lockpick kit?”

She jumped behind me and unzipped the bag in a rush, all the while more grunts and shrieks sounded from behind the door.

Chad’s gruff voice sounded again. “If you would just fucking behave, I’d make this really fucking good for you. I want a taste of what I’d been promised before the Knight bitch fucked everything up!”

“Shit shit shit,” I whispered as I jammed my tension wrench into the lock.

“We never had an actual marriage contract, Chad!” Hannah screeched, and I was relieved to hear her sounding angry and generally unharmed. “You’ve lost your fucking mind!”

“I’ll take her and run,” Mari whispered. “I don’t want to leave you here, but I also know that’s what you’re going to tell me to do.”

I nodded as I slid my rake into the lock above the wrench and wiggled until I felt the pins catch. “Go get the guys or Max. I’ll be fine.”

I turned the lock and barreled into the room without a second thought.

Chad had Hannah trapped on the small bed in the room—the cramped space and sparse furnishings indicating it was a bedroom meant for the crew. He'd thrown his big body on top of hers as she thrashed valiantly under him. The strap of her sapphire blue dress was torn, and she had what looked like a busted lip, but she was thankfully still fully clothed and spitting mad.

"Shit!" Chad barked as I flew at him.

I rammed my shoulder into his substantial gut, knocking him off Hannah, and we both tumbled to the floor as Chad bellowed in rage.

"Hannah, get the fuck out of here!" I yelled. "Go with Mari!"

Hannah scrambled off the bed and stumbled to the door where Mari waited. Hannah cried, "We can't just leave her with him!"

Chad tossed me off him, and I rolled to my feet, readying for his attack.

Mari just shook her head before she grabbed a wide-eyed Hannah's hand, and they bolted out the door.

"Well, if it isn't the Southside trash, here to ruin my fun once again," Chad drawled as he got to his feet. He cracked his thick neck and rolled his shoulders as his beady eyes took me in with a hunger I did not like. "Your timing is inconvenient because I was really looking forward to sampling the goods I'd been *promised* before Langford switched fucking teams. But I had planned for us to have a little chat tonight at some point. Might as well be now."

He slipped his phone from the pocket of his dumb fucking khaki shorts and scrolled, now looking smug. His wide body was blocking my way to the door, but if he thought I was going to just stand here and "chat" with him, he was truly an idiot.

"I don't allow rapist bullies at my birthday party, Chaddy," I said, taking a small step forward. "So unless you want my knife stuck into another one of your appendages, you're going to follow me to the bridge. I think Captain Martinez will be happy to drop you off as we pass Industrial City on our return trip. You can walk your fat ass back to the City from there."

He laughed—because he was stupid and hubristic and still just a fucking *man* underestimating a woman once again. "Fuck that. We're

going to stay right here."

"Are you fucking dumb?" I spat. "I know you still haven't gotten it through your thick skull that I can handle you, but did you forget all three of my deadly boyfriends and my equally deadly brother are on this boat? I *know* you haven't forgotten what Bennett did to your face, Chad. Your nose didn't quite go back to the way it was, did it?"

"Shut up, you filthy fucking whore!" he barked.

"Move," I demanded.

"Fuck you."

I leapt at him. We collided, and he had to fling me off him before his back hit the ground, since he didn't want me to have the upper hand—just like I'd known he would. He launched me over his head, and I landed lightly on the staircase outside the door. He rolled over, and I bolted up the stairs as he scrambled to follow me.

I crested the stairs in the small lounge with Chad right on my heels. I felt him snag the straps of my little backpack, and I whirled on him. I blocked the meaty fist he launched at my face, and I sank my knee into his stomach. He released my backpack, then tossed a follow-up punch at me that just clipped my ear. It stung like a bitch, but I didn't have time to fret about it because Chad was coming again, determined to keep me in this room for whatever reason, while I was slowly but surely backing us toward the door to the aft deck with vague plans to chase him in the direction of the bridge—or let him chase me there—until one or all of the bloodthirsty men in my life showed up for an assist.

This time I took the brunt of our collision, taking us to the ground and rolling Chad off me. I flipped, getting my feet under me and ready to sprint the last five feet to the door, when Chad's hand closed around my ankle and dragged me backward.

It was all so eerily familiar, and unfortunately, this time I didn't have my knife in my hand. Chad would avoid having his hand impaled, but he would not avoid having my bare foot jammed right into his barely healed nose.

"Fuck!" he shouted, rearing back and bringing his hand to his nose, the blood immediately seeping through his fingers.

I turned again, jumping to my feet.

“Oh no, you fucking don’t!” he bellowed, lurching to stand up and still surprisingly nimble for someone so wide and also gushing blood from his nose.

I ran for the door.

Come on, Chaddy. Come get me.

He slammed into me again, and we went careening out onto the aft deck, still quiet and deserted with only Chad’s grunts and the distant laughs, shouts, and thumping of the music filling the night air.

I bounced off the railing, shoving him away from me, and I’d just turned and readied myself to hurdle the loveseat we’d upended on our way out the door when I froze.

The barrel of the tiniest little handgun imaginable was pointed right at my head as Harper held it aloft in a shaky hand. She crept along the narrow walkway that bordered the yacht’s spacious main cabin until she was standing a few feet in front of me, just out of my reach.

“Fucking took you long enough, Jansen,” Chad spat. He grasped my forearms roughly and wrenched them behind my back, keeping me locked in place.

It was a hold I knew I could break out of without much sweat, but I didn’t trust Jansen and her trembling hand on that fucking gun.

“Yes, well, I’m here now,” she barked at Chad. “I had to make sure I wasn’t seen coming back here, *obviously*.”

I’d be having a discussion later with my security about letting this bitch sneak a gun into my party, but I suspected she’d stashed that little thing in her bra—Harper was wearing a suspiciously ample amount of clothing for someone who would have jumped at the opportunity to run around in a bikini in front of Bennett or any other man on this boat.

“Hurry up and fucking do it,” Chad hissed. “We can’t fuck this up.”

That didn’t sound good. My mind whirled, and my mouth started running.

“Are you two on a secret mission?” I asked. “What’s in this for you, Jansen? Seeing as how you’d be going down for murder if you pull that trigger, it must be something pretty spectacular.”

She scoffed. “I will not be going down for anything. Spencer still runs this City, and I’ll be taken care of once you’re gone.”

I gave her a pitying look. “And you think Bennett is just going to fall right back into your engagement if you off me?”

“We have a binding contract!” she screeched, her hand shaking even more. “If you would just *die*, we could put everything back the way it was.”

Chad yanked on my arms, and sharp pain shot through my shoulders. “Shut the fuck up, bitch. Jansen, she’s trying to distract you. Fucking *do it*.”

“I dunno, Chad,” I said, trying to calm my thundering heart. I had to watch Harper so, *so* carefully or else I really would be fucked. “That’s her bad wrist, and that hand looks pretty wobbly. I’d say it’s fifty-fifty whether it’s you or me who gets the bullet.”

“Chad! Make her stop talking!”

“What’s in this for you, Chad?” I went on. “An *attaboy* from James Spencer himself?”

“Try a fucking Heirship,” he growled behind me. “Hendrickson elevated to Four Families status. Knight fucking wiped from the City completely. You at the bottom of the fucking river where you belong. Everything I could ever want.”

James Spencer sure did love dangling a seat at the table of the fabled Four Families to entice people to kill me.

I was getting so fucking tired of it.

“Chad, she needs to be still!” Harper snapped.

“Come on, Jansen, for fuck’s sake!” Chad screamed back at her.

The moment I clocked the twitch of her finger—the same moment that thundering footsteps sounded along the walkway behind her—I moved.

I dropped like a rock, startling Chad as he lurched forward to hang onto my arms. The blast of the gunshot sounded, and an excruciating pain ripped through my right shoulder.

Zach’s panicked shout came next. “Jojo!”

Blood splattered all over me. I felt it wash over my head, my neck, dripping down my back as I hit the deck hard.

Harper screamed. Bennett tackled her to the ground, her gun clattering to the teak floor where Noah scooped it up and flicked the safety on, stashing it in his pocket before pivoting to run to me.

I rolled, turning to face the back of the boat. Strong arms banded around me while I watched with detached fascination as Chad stumbled backward, his fleshy hands now clamped around his own neck. Harper's bullet had hit him there, and he was helpless to stop the bleeding or the momentum of his stocky form as he slammed into the railing and flipped right over the side. No scream, just a loud splash.

And then fucking Chad Hendrickson—asshole of the highest order, idiot bully, and confirmed sexual predator—was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JOLIE



"Princess, fuck, are you okay?" Zach breathed into my ear as he held me.

I groaned. "Yeah. The blood is all Chad's, but I'm pretty sure I dislocated my fucking shoulder."

Noah skidded to a stop next to us and dropped to his knees, totally unconcerned with his lingering injury or the puddle of blood that was now soaking through his fancy chinos. He reached out to cup my face in gentle hands. "Oh, Jojo. Shit. I'm so sorry we weren't here. I'm so fucking sorry."

I gave him a rueful smile. "Noah, it all happened really fucking fast. I made the decision not to wait for backup because Chad was hurting Hannah. You came as quickly as you could. I know you did."

Harper screeched from nearby. Bennett loomed over her with an enraged look on his face as Max had her pinned to the floor, straddling her as he zip-tied her hands behind her back.

"Get your dirty Southside hands off me! Bennett!" she wailed.

He ignored her, glancing over to look at me instead. His stoic face broke as he took me in, disheveled and covered in blood. "Angel. *Fuck*."

"I'm fine, Bennett," I croaked. "But someone tell Martinez to divert us to the Boathouse because I need Dom to put my shoulder back in place."

Max stood up, keeping a booted foot on Harper's back. "I already texted Dad, Jojo. No doubt he's calling Martinez as we speak to demand he turn this boat around immediately."

On cue, the yacht began to list. We were already on the cruise back north toward the Academy, but Martinez was now taking us west toward Olde Town.

Bennett left Harper with Max and strode over to me. He scooped me gingerly into his arms before sitting us on the low couch nearby. He cradled me, and I could feel the slight tremble of his body beneath me.

I leaned into him with my good shoulder, burying my face in his chest. "Shh, Bennett. I'm okay. None of this blood is mine. It's not like last time."

"I know, Angel. I just… I can't look at you like this. It hurts."

Zach joined us, sliding my legs into his lap before clapping Bennett on the shoulder, an understanding look in those dark eyes. "I think from now on, you're not allowed out of our sight, Princess. None of us are going to handle this well. We almost just lost you again." He swallowed, and a tiny tear leaked from his eye.

I sucked in a breath and reached for his hand, wincing as pain shot through my shoulder. "Zach. I know. Please don't cry. Please. I would never leave you again."

Noah sat down on the coffee table in front of us, his blood-soaked knees almost knocking into Bennett's. He hung his head in his hands. "We need to call this in and get it cleaned up. I can't believe we just… let those two on the yacht without asking questions. It almost fucking cost us *everything*."

I met Max's concerned stare. He was rattled, too, but he knew how triggering this was for the guys and was going to let them have their time with me. "I've got it, Hargraves," he said, whipping out his phone. "Silver's got access to all the onboard cameras, right?"

"Yeah," Noah muttered, not lifting his head.

"We'll make sure the evidence of Tier One Barbie's crimes makes it into the right hands. I say we toss her to the cops in Olde Town and let them deal with her parents."

I nodded. It was still unlikely that Harper would actually go down for whatever had happened here—accidental homicide, attempted

murder—but the Jansens were going to have to spin their wheels for a while to clean this up.

“Have Silver send the tape to Montgomery Star Media,” I added.

That was the thing that made Harper gasp and start shrieking again. “Bennett! You’re going to regret this. Our parents have been making these plans for us for *years*, and I’m not going to let you ruin our future because you’re blinded by this crass, trashy bitch!”

Bennett acted like she wasn’t even here. “Angel, we’re going to get you fixed up, and then I’m going to tie you to the fucking bed and never let you leave,” he growled in my ear.

“Amen,” Zach added.

I huffed. “Stop that.”

“Three against one,” Noah said with a small smile. “We’ll just fuck you until you’re too sated and exhausted to even think about ever leaving the bed.”

Max sighed audibly as he put his phone to his ear. “Can we table the gang-bang discussion until I’ve had more to fucking drink, Nelson?”



“SONUVABITCH!” I shouted as Dom shoved my shoulder back where it belonged with a lot of force and no finesse.

“That was so good, sweetheart,” Noah cooed. He stood next to me where I sat on a barstool at the counter of our little kitchen because he’d won the roshambo to be the one whose hand I crushed into dust as Dom fixed me.

“Honey, honestly, this is not what I wanted to give you on your birthday,” Dom said with a big sigh. He popped a kiss on the top of my head, hopefully avoiding the dried blood caked into my hair. “But thank God you’re okay. I’m having a meeting tomorrow with the security team we put on that boat because this is extremely unacceptable.”

“Don’t be too hard on them,” I said as I rubbed at my shoulder. “We didn’t expressly forbid any Holywell student from the party.”

“We got cocky,” Bennett muttered. He sat at our little dining table next to his mother, whose enjoyable night with Dom and Laura had been rudely interrupted by our trudging into the apartment covered in varying amounts of blood. Martinez sat with them, looking tired but also pleased to be excused from babysitting a bunch of drunk college students and back with his… charge.

Bruce had not exactly been thrilled to be receiving a superyacht full of entitled students at his dock, but those students had been even less thrilled when Martinez announced that the ride stopped here and everyone could put their fucking asses on the train back to the City.

The Olde Town cops had been almost bewildered that we’d called them at all, and then had passed a crying, thrashing Harper into their custody before leaving them with the murder weapon and a statement that was generally the truth. We didn’t have to hide what had happened to Chad Hendrickson—Harper shot him, he fell overboard, and we’d have the security camera video proving this to them shortly.

The cops could deal with Edward Jansen, and then Edward Jansen could deal with Benedict Hendrickson, whose son was now lost to the black depths of the Obsidian because of Edward’s daughter.

A little Tier One civil war was always entertaining.

“Here, sweetie,” Laura said, appearing in front of me to hand me an ice pack. I took it from her, then she started rubbing at my face and neck with a wet towel, scrubbing the blood away like she would the streaks on the windows of her bookstore. “I’m sorry your birthday party was ruined. As much as I’ve worried over the years about how trained for violence Dom and the Shadows have made a grieving girl, tonight I’m thankful for it.”

“You can say that again,” Zach said, shooting me a strained but sexy smile from his spot on our couch. He and Max—with whom he’d had an armistice for a while now—were collegially cleaning their handguns together at the coffee table.

It was pretty much a Rockwell painting in here.

As Dom moseyed into the kitchen to finish doing the dishes from their earlier dinner, Martinez blew out a frustrated breath. “Of course

we couldn't get through my first yacht voyage without someone being killed on my ship. Not that I'm sorry that little bastard's gone," he added, nodding at me.

I wasn't either. Chad had crossed the line and onto the kill-if-convenient list the moment he laid a hand on Hannah, and he'd only solidified his spot by becoming James Spencer's hitman.

Mari had shooed us off to Dom's with the promise that she'd see Hannah safely back to the Academy and watch over her there. Before we parted, I'd made sure to tell Mari what a capable lieutenant she'd become—because she'd done everything exactly right from the moment we first heard Chad's disgusting grunts. Hannah seemed shaken but otherwise just generally pissed off that she'd been taken unaware by Chad when she'd wandered to a quiet part of the boat to film a video for her social media.

"Oh, Bennett," Mrs. Spencer said suddenly, perking up. "Laura and I made a cake for your lovely girlfriend. And for Noah," she added, sending Noah a little wink. "Why don't we end this night on a higher note?"

Bennett squeezed her hand. "Sounds great, Mom." Then he narrowed his eyes at Martinez, whose soft, smitten stare at Bridgette was… not subtle.

And so, after I'd taken a quick shower and the boys had changed out of their blood-smeared clothes, we all stood around our little kitchen as Laura produced a three-tiered monstrosity of a chocolate cake topped with a mountain of sprinkles. She'd just begun to light the candles when the doors to our small balcony patio opened, and Frankie breezed into the living room.

We all just stared at him.

"Oh, are we having cake?" he asked casually, strolling into the kitchen and side-eyeing Max oh-so-quickly. He hopped onto an open barstool and dabbed the sweat from his brow using the hem of his blue tank top—this one had "Reel Big Fish" scrawled across the front—exposing his leanly muscled, tattooed torso. He glanced around the room again and said, "At least I didn't miss *all* the fun tonight."

Laura—of all people—was the first to respond. "Frankie, honey, we've talked about using the front door."

My boyfriends, Max, and I slowly shifted our stares to Laura.

“Mom,” Max said slowly. “You’ve been having Frankie Fingers over here?”

Frankie grinned as he accepted the can of strawberry sparkling water Dom handed him without comment. “I like books,” he said with a shrug.

I coughed. Clearly he was doing this while Max was at school or the gym, and I did not know what the fuck kind of game those two were playing with each other but would be getting to the bottom of it in short order.

“That’s true,” Zach said. “Frankie’s partial to smutty shit with, like, vampires and demons.”

“And dicks,” Frankie added, wagging his pierced eyebrows and determinedly *not* looking at Max, whose dark stare was boring a hole in the side of Frankie’s face.

Zach rolled his eyes at his uncle before he gave him a stern look. “Where the fuck have you been, man?”

“I was at the Snake Pit, if you must know,” he replied with a withering look. “I can’t chase you four around at all hours of the day. I do occasionally have other business to attend to.”

I raised my hand.

“Yes, Little Knight?”

“The Snake Pit’s still going, even after the demise of Ferrero?” I asked, confused. That was Andrea’s main underground fighting club. A lot of dirty money, no rules, illegal gambling, the works.

Zach cleared his throat. “Yeah, I gave that to Frankie. He likes to blow off steam down there, and it’s still a good place for Enforcer recruitment.”

I shrugged. “Cool.”

It was probably good for Frankie to have hobbies.

Bennett’s mom clapped her hands. “Well, then. Let’s all have some cake, shall we?”

Laura finally lit the candles, and after a rousing round of “Happy Birthday to You,” I inhaled a very large slice of my yellow cake with chocolate frosting and sprinkles—that combo a thing that Noah and I had always agreed on.

I leaned into him, our chairs smashed together at the table in the place of honor.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart,” he whispered in my ear while the rest of the group laughed and chatted.

“Happy birthday, Noah,” I murmured back, then I gave him a chocolatey kiss. “Even with the, you know, murder plots and bloody deaths and whatnot, this is still the best birthday I’ve had since our *Frozen* party.”

“Me too,” he replied, pulling me in for another kiss. “Because we’re together again.”

That night I snuggled up to my birthday twin in my little bunk bed. Max collapsed into his bed below us after growling at Noah to keep it in his pants. Bennett and Zach took Mrs. Spencer home to her cute townhouse a few blocks away and stayed the night there, sending Martinez home in a huff.

Frankie disappeared to who knew where, and Dom and Laura stayed up and cuddled on the couch while watching whatever rom-com Laura had chosen for the night that Dom would gripe about but secretly enjoy.

My heart was full, and I tried to take a moment to bask in the warm feelings of the end of the night, when I had all of my people around me—minus Mari, who I missed a whole lot—and we just had a *normal* time like a normal family would.

It was time to rid the City of its last cancer—James Spencer and those who continued to prop him up, but it would have to wait another day.

I was at peace with that fact as I fell quickly to sleep in Noah’s arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BENNETT



My posture was rigid, reminiscent of my father, as I sat behind the desk in Andrea's old office at the Euphoria Club, awaiting my scheduled meeting. My navy suit was pressed to perfection, my shoes shined, and my hair freshly cut and styled by Rocky's barber next-door.

I took a sip of the glass of scotch that sat on a golden coaster on the ostentatious desk, then I adjusted my cufflinks as I cast my critical stare around the room. Zach had officially taken full control of the Club after Andrea's death, but erasing her presence from this place would take longer than the two weeks he'd had. The gaudy trinkets and the worst of the artwork had been removed, but the furniture was still frilly and way too fucking French.

It was Friday night, and it was also John Tyler's birthday. Having learned a hard lesson last weekend about throwing giant, ridiculous birthday parties, Zach suggested an intimate gathering at the Club so that he could swing by and check on things. Our small circle of friends was out on the floor at the VIP table, enjoying the music, the drinks, and the show.

For the past week, Zach, Noah, and I had watched Jolie like a trio of jumpy, obsessive stalkers, which she'd fucking hated but also kind of loved. If I didn't know exactly where she was at this very moment,

I'd have struggled to keep the placid, calm demeanor I desired for this meeting.

My phone buzzed against the top of the lily-white desk.

Zach: I offered JT a night upstairs for his birthday present but he declined

Angel: he has a thing for Devin, how have you not noticed?

Noah: oh no wonder he looked so awkward

Zach: ha shit, my bad

Zach: excited for your meeting, Spencer?

Me: I'm beside myself with joy.

Sarcasm aside, I was actually looking forward to crossing another thing off our list. Harper was finished—released into the custody of her parents but expelled from Holywell. Chad's parents were frothing at the mouth to press charges against her, and the infighting between the two Spencer Tier One giants had already rattled my father's few remaining staunch allies. I suspected Benedict Hendrickson was itching for some new way to throw his weight around because he'd been on house arrest ever since Jolie sent the feds to his door and those of every other member of his little child porn club.

Only a few more dominoes left to fall.

A knock sounded.

"Come in."

The Club's new head bouncer, a hulking man named Demetrius who I knew from Dom's gym, stuck his head in the door.

"I have your ten o'clock appointment to see you, Mr. Spencer."

I waved a hand. "Send her in. Thanks, D."

He disappeared, and the door creaked open further to reveal the reason I was in a meeting on a fucking Friday night instead of enjoying time with our friends.

Elise Proctor.

She prowled into the office, her smile sly as she ran her ravenous gaze from my face down my body and to where my hands lay clasped on the desk. She'd changed out of her usual sexy-secretary-themed work attire and instead wore something more suited for a night at the Club—a slinky red dress that dipped low between her large breasts and clung to every curve of her body. Her strappy

heels added four inches to her stature, bringing her to just about Jolie's height in bare feet.

"I'm so pleased you agreed to see me, Bennett," she said, her voice breathy and excited. She helped herself to one of the chairs in front of the desk, making sure she crossed her legs slowly and deliberately, letting the hem of her dress ride up her thighs. "You certainly look like you belong behind that desk. The desk of the leader of the Four Families."

I didn't respond, instead just taking a sip of my scotch as I eyed her, detached and bored.

After my father's last plan to take my Angel from me failed miserably and got the son of one of his closest associates killed, he hadn't called me. Spencer Tower had been suspiciously quiet, but Elise had reached out to me two nights ago.

And she'd done it via a burner phone, which was how we knew she had finally abandoned hope that my father was her ticket to a life of power and luxury.

Her coy smile didn't falter. "I'm sure you're curious as to why I've requested a meeting."

"I can guess, Elise."

Her smile grew. "Of course. You're an intelligent, capable man, Bennett. It's clear to me that it should be *you* at the helm of Spencer. I'm ready to assist you… in *any* way you need."

I leaned back in my chair, steepling my fingers under my chin just as my father would have, and I pretended to consider her. "I have certainly learned some things about you, Elise," I said quietly. "It appears you played a crucial role in a plot that almost made my father richer than anyone else on the planet."

She chuckled, her grin smug. "It takes a woman to get things done, Bennett. Men are… simple creatures. Present company excluded, of course."

"Of course," I agreed. "I suppose it took very little effort to play Anders like a fiddle."

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far, sweetie," she replied with a tinkling laugh, looking me up and down again. "Anders very much enjoyed my *efforts*. It wasn't the most fun I've ever had, but it was all for Spencer."

I lifted a brow. She apparently thought I'd find her admitting she'd whored herself out for the Family attractive. "And yet, your *efforts* were for naught, weren't they? Jeffrey Knight's discovery is now in the hands of a charitable foundation and twenty research universities around the world."

She bristled. "Trust a man to screw it up in the end. Anders was useless after all, unfortunately." She uncrossed and recrossed her legs, then her sultry smile was back. "But I hear you're the one who rid the City of his whining once and for all. James was in a rage about it all, but I have to say I found the thought rather… stimulating."

Christ.

"And yet here you are, abandoning Spencer," I said, tutting. "The disloyalty to my father, Elise."

"*You* are Spencer, Bennett," she replied, leaning forward now so I had a clear view down the front of her dress. "I've known it for a while now. I am ready to serve you. To see to your *every* need."

I resisted the urge to pinch my brow. "You mean you're ready to fuck me, Elise. Stop playing coy."

She sat back, unruffled, that persistent smile remaining on her painted red lips. "I would show you things you could never have *dreamed* of while you've only been with little girls and hookers, Bennett. It's time you had a real *woman* by your side."

I sighed. This charade had gone on long enough.

"So, let me get this straight," I began, finally letting some of the venom I felt for this reprehensible woman seep into my voice. "You saw the writing on the wall as each one of the remaining Families fell under the sword of Jolie Knight. Attempt after attempt on her life has failed. Peter Hargraves is long gone. Andrea Ferrero is dead. Spencer is on its last legs. And instead of going down with the ship—instead of staying loyal to the man you've literally destroyed *lives* for over these past eight years, the man you're *fucking*—you thought you could waltz into this office, hop onto my dick, and I'd shove everything aside to make you the queen of my new kingdom?"

Her seductive grin had faltered as I went on, her eyes widening in true shock as I laid the truth right at her feet.

"Bennett—"

“No,” I snapped. “I’ve heard enough out of you to last me five lifetimes, Elise. Listen carefully: I wouldn’t touch you if you were the last woman on earth. *You* are the reason I lost the love of my life for seven long, brutal fucking years. *You* are the reason her parents were senselessly murdered right in front of her. *You* are the reason my mother can no longer stand to be in her own home. You are a despicable, conniving cunt, and your time is up.”

She stood abruptly, smoothing her dress, her simpering smile strained. “Well, I can see I have wasted my time and yours, Bennett. I’m just sad you’ve been led this far astray from who you were born to be. I’ll see myself out.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, you evil fucking bitch.”

Jolie stood in front of the closed office door, casually twirling her knife through her fingers and looking like a fallen angel ready to burn down the world. Her skin-tight purple top, short black skirt, fishnet tights, and chunky black combat boots were a striking contrast to the soft, ethereal waves of her white-blonde hair that framed her face and the sweet dusting of freckles on her cheeks.

The hints of the little girl who’d been my best friend melded seamlessly into the gorgeous phoenix risen from the ashes of what the Families had wrought.

And I was so in love with her, my whole body ached at the sight.

Elise stopped cold, unaware that my Angel had been sitting quietly in a recessed corner of the office just inside the entrance where Andrea had kept her fully stocked bar cart. Elise’s lips pursed, and her nose went into the air. “Jolie Knight. We meet at last.”

Jolie’s answering smile was slow. Eager. “Indeed. I did have the opportunity to get acquainted with your sister, but I’ve been looking forward to our introduction for some time now.”

Elise flushed at the mention of her sister, who was still bedridden in her mother’s apartment in Baltimore, last we checked. “Yes, the entire City is aware of your penchant for using your fists to get what you want like the ghetto-raised deviant you are.”

Jolie’s blonde brow quirked. “Ah, yes, instead of using my pussy like high-class ladies such as yourself.”

Elise scoffed. “Stones and glass houses, Miss Knight. You’re screwing all three Heirs of the Families, and look what it got you.”

Jolie advanced, causing Elise to take a startled step back. “First of all, two of my boyfriends are the *heads* of their Families now, and the third will be the same imminently—you just said so yourself. Second, everything I have I got without opening my fucking legs. I planned, I earned the loyalty of my people, and I *took* back what was mine. And then I buried the people responsible for killing my Family and stealing from me.”

Elise’s backside hit the chair she’d been sitting in earlier as Jolie crept toward her, the blade of her knife glinting under the office’s harsh fluorescent lighting. I kept my blank, bored stare even as my dick was growing hard under the desk.

“How does it feel, Elise?” Jolie murmured, stopping to run her icy eyes over Elise’s stiff form, her lip curling with disgust. “How does it feel to know all that dick you’ve ridden over the years in hopes of becoming queen of the City has only led you here? Staring into the eyes of the little girl you were ready to see executed next to her parents to please your master?”

Elise was seething. “You really are just a little girl playing at being a queen. Your parents are dead because they were *weak*, and this precarious little kingdom you’ve built by stealing from the *real* leaders of this City is going to crumble around you.” She straightened, standing tall and sneering at her like Jolie was her equal and not a predator that had cornered her prey. “And you’ll *never* be able to please Bennett like I could.”

With a movement so fast I almost missed it, Jolie ceased the lazy twirling of her knife, grasped the hilt, and buried the blade in Elise’s stomach.

Elise gasped, then she shrieked in pain as Jolie jerked the knife free. She lifted her heavy boot and kicked Elise to the floor, and she crumpled in a heap of red satin and blood. She coughed and screeched as Jolie jumped on top of her, pinning her flailing arms with her knees. I watched in awe and utter fascination as Jolie leaned down until the two of them were almost nose-to-nose, her face hardening into the cold, focused killer I knew she harbored inside of her.

“Fuck you, Elise Proctor,” she growled. “You will never destroy another family, and you will never, *ever* have Bennett Spencer. He.

Is. *Mine*."

She slit Elise's throat with a flash of her blade, and then as fast as it had happened, she was on her feet. She kicked the body away from her before turning to face me, breathing hard and saying nothing.

I jumped to my feet and strode quickly around the desk, and I stopped just a few feet in front of her, holding her fiery stare with mine, looking desperately for a sign that my Angel was still with me —that she was okay.

She tossed her knife to the floor without a second glance, then she threw herself into my arms, wrapped her legs around my hips, and plastered her mouth to mine.

I groaned against her lips. *There's my Angel*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JOLIE



"Bennett," I moaned. "Oh fuck."

He stared up at me from between my thighs with those heated moss-green eyes, his wicked tongue working my clit relentlessly. I was slumped in Andrea's white leather desk chair with my legs tossed over Bennett's shoulders as I rode the adrenaline high of ridding the world of that duplicitous bitch with my own two hands.

My body had begun to shake as what I'd just done hit me, but Bennett had held me tight and consumed me with his kiss before he dumped me in the chair, knelt at my feet like I was his queen and he was my servant, then ripped through the crotch of my tights like they were made of tissue paper.

Now I trembled for a different reason.

Bennett wrapped his lips around my clit and sucked hard, driving two thick fingers into me without warning. I squirmed, my muscles tightening, the ball of pleasure building in my core with every thrust of his fingers before it burst.

He growled against my pussy as I came hard, and I had no doubt the entire Club would've heard my scream if Andrea's office hadn't been soundproofed years ago.

As I came down, I met his eyes again, the intensity of his stare never wavering as he ran his tongue slowly through my folds. "Why

are we always fucking in front of the bodies of people we've killed, Bennett?" I asked with a soft sigh.

He hummed against my sensitive flesh before he rumbled, "Because nothing gets me hotter than the destruction of anyone who's ever hurt you, Angel."

If I hadn't already been a boneless heap from Bennett's masterful mouth between my legs, his beautiful words would've had me docile as a baby lamb.

For a minute, anyway.

I gazed fondly down at him—my broody, serious, perfect love. I ran my fingers through his chocolate-brown hair, mussing it just the way I liked, before my hazy little bubble was broken.

Bennett stood abruptly, yanking me to my feet as he went. He wrapped a firm hand around my neck and pulled me in for a filthy, possessive kiss, and I moaned into his mouth as I bunched the lapels of his suit tight in my greedy little fists.

Before I'd gotten my fill of his kiss, I found myself thrown facedown onto the surface of the desk, Bennett's glass of scotch and some loose papers flying off the side. A big hand pinned me down as another flipped my skirt up to expose my ass to the beast behind me.

"*Bennett*," I growled as I bucked under him. "I want to watch you fuck me."

"That's too bad, Angel," he said lightly as he gathered my wrists behind my back, somehow still mindful of my sore shoulder even as he forced my limbs to move exactly where he wanted them. He leaned down, pressing his cheek to mine as he growled into my ear. "Because I want to fuck you just like this. I want you under me, submitting to me, screaming my fucking name. I'm going to own your body here in this office because you get to own my *soul* the rest of the time." I felt the soft silk of his tie loop around my wrists, and I groaned as I felt my pussy clench around nothing. He went on, "So, you're going to lie here and take my cock, and you're going to fucking love it."

I was—I knew I was. I always wanted to fight Bennett tooth and nail at every turn, to prove I was powerful, his equal in every way, to show him what I was made of.

But Bennett knew what I was made of. He knew I was a force to be reckoned with and that I would do *anything* for the people I loved, including slitting the throat of the woman whose scheming had killed my parents and torn apart his mother's home.

And *fuck* it felt good to be dominated by this powerful, wonderful man.

Still, I yanked on the tie binding my wrists behind my back and hissed, "Fine. Show me, then, Spencer. Fuck me like you *mean it*."

I heard the sound of his zipper one second before he plunged that giant dick into me so hard, I shrieked. He held me steady, one hand pressing me into the desk while the other gripped my hip, and he pounded into me ruthlessly because he knew I could take it.

He knew how much I wanted it, craved it, *needed* it after the events of the night.

"Bennett, oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck," I chanted as I felt my climax begin to crest again.

"Fuck yes, Angel. You look so fucking pretty with my tie around your wrists and my dick driving into your pussy. I'm going to truss you up like a fucking feast and keep you underneath me forever. Maybe I'll even feed you my cock—I know how much you're fucking craving it."

I moaned, then I gasped as he increased his already brutal pace. "*Yes*," I hissed. "Yes, oh—oh God, Bennett!"

I fell over the edge, and he let out a hoarse shout as he fell with me. Even the soft click of the door opening and closing couldn't derail the train I was on. I was lost to Bennett, and he to me, until a throaty chuckle finally tore me from the clouds.

"Goddamn, Spencer," Zach said as he stepped over the body on the floor without so much as a second glance. "Are you giving our Princess a reward for her hard work?"

"That looks like he's giving himself a reward," Noah mused, eyeing Elise with a wrinkled nose and a curled lip before he turned to us and gave me his big, beaming smile. "Hi, sweetheart. I see you got Bennett's tie—were you not behaving?"

I grinned lazily at him. "I only behave for you, Noah. You know that."

Bennett scoffed. He'd eased out of me and was busy untying my hands. Then he rubbed my wrists gently before he flipped my skirt back down and pulled me down into his lap where he sat in Andrea's chair. He pressed a kiss into the crook of my neck before he retorted at Noah, "We negotiated. I got what I wanted."

"Mmm, well," Noah said as he ran his deep blue gaze over the two of us. "You're both a little gross. I think you should take Jojo upstairs to the shower while Zach's cleanup crew fixes this mess."

I nodded. I'd certainly made a mess earlier, but I was only just now noticing how much of it I was wearing. I looked at Zach. "Do you guys still have a special courier like you used for Silverman? I think we should send her head to James Spencer."

His eyebrows jumped, and Noah also gave me a confused look. Bennett snorted like he wasn't even surprised.

"Do I even want to know how you know about that?" Zach asked as he brought his phone to his ear.

I shrugged, pasting a nonchalant look on my face. "You're aware I broke into the Club's basement last semester. It just happened to be on a… busy night for you guys."

Zach rolled his eyes. "Of course you were there that night. Of course you were."

Noah shook his head with an amused smile. "Still full of surprises, sweetheart. It's hard to believe we ever thought you were just a troublemaking scholarship student with a hot body and a smart mouth."

"When in actual fact you're a troublemaking *heiress* with a hot body and a smart mouth," Bennett added.

I elbowed him. "You love me."

"I do."

Zach hung up his phone, then he moved to stand over the body on the floor. "Did she have a purse? The crew chief reminded me to search her for anything we wanted to keep."

I motioned to the little black clutch that had landed a few feet away. "There. Get her phone at least."

Noah trotted over to grab it, looking thankful the purse was relatively free of gore. "I'll get this to Silver. Go get clean, you two. We'll inform our friends that you guys are having some alone time

after Bennett's meeting in which nothing weird or violent happened whatsoever."



I awoke the next morning in a pile of limbs in my bed in Knight Tower, the urgent buzzing of Noah's phone on the nightstand pulling me from a lovely dream about being eight years old and building a snowman with the guys during one of the rare times it had snowed in the City.

"Damn it, Hargraves," Zach croaked sleepily. "Answer that."

Noah groaned, then he rolled onto his side and fumbled for the phone. "Yeah?"

"Sir." I could hear Silver's no-nonsense voice. "We've got it. You guys should get down here as soon as possible."

I bolted upright, turning to stare down at Noah with wide eyes. "They got what they needed from Elise's phone?"

Noah gave me a quick nod as he said to Silver, "Give us ten."

It only took us nine to jostle Bennett awake, throw on clothes, and pile into the elevator. We exited twenty-odd floors below our home and barreled through Knight's IT floor like a herd of anxious elephants. Noah let us into Silver's command center with a press of his thumb to the scanner by the door, and we found Silver and Marcus alone in the dark room, both of them seated in front of a panel of half a dozen large screens.

"Boss lady!" Zepp crowed from one of the screens as we entered.

Well, everyone was here, then—Zepp had deigned to make an actual video appearance. His thin face was partially obscured by his low baseball cap, and his dark gray hoodie definitely had donut dust on it. He had his long auburn hair pulled into its usual low ponytail at the nape of his neck.

Silver glanced our way, still looking every bit the professional she always did—dark-framed glasses, fitted blouse, cropped black pants and sensible flats. If it weren't for her shocking pink hair, I'd have thought she was one of my lawyers.

“Right on time,” she said, motioning us over. Noah slid into an open seat at the computers and logged right in.

Zach and I dropped onto the small couch nearby, and Zach’s big hand fastened around my thigh immediately. Bennett remained standing, looming and rigid as he prepared to watch us finally land the killing blow on Spencer.

Marcus spun in his chair, looking disheveled and irritated about being here on a Saturday morning—which he really shouldn’t have been, since he and Silver both had extremely nice apartments one floor above us. He was shorter than Zach but just as muscular, and he had even more tattoos. There wasn’t a bare patch of skin on his arms or hands, and even his neck sported creeping vines that disappeared into his dark hair.

He eyed me warily as he said, “Silver informs me that I don’t want to know the details of how you came to possess Elise Proctor’s cell phone.”

I shrugged. “She waltzed into a meeting with Bennett and basically handed it over.”

Zach laughed at Marcus. “You cut your teeth in the Snake Pit and you’re afraid to hear about our Princess’s… *abilities* with a knife?”

He shivered. “There’s a reason I’m tucked safely in here and not on your security floor, Ferrero.”

“Marcus,” Silver snapped, and he rolled his eyes before he swiveled back to his screens. “Focus and prepare to deploy the package.”

Bennett vibrated with tension. “You’re sure this will work?”

“Yep,” Zepp replied. “You were right in guessing that Proctor would have the same access to all of Spencer and anything it touches as your father does. We were able to pull the cypher from what we could access on her phone. The whole Spencer system is about to get fucked in the ass.”

Silver glared up at Zepp, irritated but surely not surprised at his lack of professionalism. “Yes, we’re confident we’ll get in this time, Mr. Spencer.”

Bennett could only give her a sharp nod, his eyes glued to the screens like any of the code and other gibberish that was up there made much sense to any of us besides Noah.

Silver began the countdown. “In three, two, one… package deployed.” She hit one last key, then they all sat back in unison to stare up at the screens.

After a minute that felt like an hour, Noah slammed his hands on the tabletop. “Fuck yes!”

The middle screen went black, and a gorgeous design of a white horse appeared. Scrawled across the bottom in big, looping letters was the word: Checkmate.

I jumped to my feet, Zach and Noah followed, and we all converged on Bennett, who remained still as a statue, almost in shock. The guys clapped him on the back as I pulled him into a deep kiss, which he returned immediately.

“It’s done, Bennett,” I whispered.

He nodded. “He deserves it.”

James Spencer, and all of those who still stood by him, did deserve it. We’d just locked them out of every system we could infect, paralyzing the banks, hedge funds, private equity groups, and other white-collar businesses in the Spencer empire.

And unlike similar ransomware attacks, we wouldn’t be unlocking them, no matter how much money they offered us. It would take even the most skilled computer genius at Spencer weeks to dig them out of this, and by that time it would be too late.

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?” Zepp asked, motioning to the white horse. “Congrats, Jojo. Nearly to the finish line.”

Marcus produced a bottle of champagne from who knew where and made sure to pop the cork right next to Silver’s ear, and she hissed at him before swatting him on his large bicep.

I sank back into the couch and watched as everyone celebrated the culmination of years of work from Zepp and several long, hard months for Silver and Marcus. After Noah reiterated to Silver for the third time that yes, it was okay for her to have a glass of champagne on the job, she finally took a sip as her eyes met mine.

“*Thank you*,” I mouthed.

She flushed, gracing me with a small smile and a respectful dip of her head.

Maybe someday when things calmed down, we’d see if we could get Silver to loosen up a bit.

But for now, we would wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

JOLIE



"We can confirm that companies within the Spencer Family's vast portfolio have all experienced the same mysterious computer virus that has completely prevented them from functioning. Many of Spencer's affiliates and allies in the City's Tier One families are seeing the same issue. Stock is tanking and investors are panicking."

I took a giant bite of my panini as I watched Montgomery Star Media's evening news coverage of the implosion of Spencer. Zach, a saint and a king, had swung by the dining hall after his workout to grab our dinners so that we could catch the Monday evening news cycle on the guys' stupid-huge TV. I sat on the floor with my back propped up against the couch, Noah's long legs splayed on either side of my body as he was distracted by his phone.

"Consumers have likewise been spooked, and we've received reports of what is essentially a run on the bank for many of the affected companies. Oddly enough, allowing bank customers and outside investors with the various funds and wealth management firms to withdraw money from their accounts is the only function currently operating as normal at any of these companies."

Zach snorted from where he was sprawled out in the corner of the couch. "That was a nice touch. Whose idea was it again?"

“Silver’s,” Noah replied. “Unlike Zepp and Marcus, who are self-taught and do not believe in higher education, she went to business school. She started at Hargraves in hospital administration before I plucked her out and put her on my tech team.”

“It is likely that bankruptcy filings are imminent for many of these companies. We here at MSM’s business desk are predicting this as the death knell for Spencer, following in the wake of Hargraves and Ferrero that have both met a similar fate recently.”

Bennett let out a big sigh, like he was maybe, finally, releasing the last of the tension he’d been holding… for forever. His big body was pressed up against mine as he sat next to me on the floor, his hair still wet from his shower after crew practice.

I nudged him with my elbow. “You okay? I know you wanted this, but I imagine it’s still hard to watch it all fall apart after being raised to believe Spencer was your entire purpose in life.”

He threaded his fingers through mine. “My purpose in life is sitting next to me, Angel.”

I was melting again, both into Bennett’s side and under Noah’s long fingers, which he was now running absently through my hair. Happiness fizzed in my body like a drug, but somewhere in the back of my mind, dark thoughts remained.

James Spencer had been quiet—he hadn’t called Bennett even once—and I didn’t know if that was a sign of his true defeat, or if he’d do something stupid to try and take everyone down with him before he was branded a failure and laughed out of the City.

Zach, wearing a pair of black sweatpants and nothing else, rolled off the couch and bounced to his feet, the muscles of his tattooed chest and cut abdomen rippling deliciously as he clapped his hands. “This calls for a celebration. Fuck homework.”

“Zach!” I squealed as I found myself pulled to my feet then scooped into his arms, bridal style. He marched us determinedly toward his bedroom, a feral smile on his face. “I can walk, you caveman!”

Zach cackled. “You won’t be able to walk when we’re through with you, Princess.”

Noah and Bennett launched to their feet and scurried after us.

We reached Zach's bedroom—a homey, masculine space that perfectly suited him. The exposed brick of the back wall framed his California King bed like a pretty picture—its comforter a deep, serene blue that invited us to wreck it. He set me gingerly on my feet near the foot of the bed, and he leaned in for a deceptively sweet kiss as he began to undress me.

The door slammed as Bennett and Noah jostled their way into the room. Noah made it to my back first, his lips landing on my neck as he joined Zach in his task. Zach unlatched his lips from mine just long enough to pull my crew team T-shirt over my head, and Noah kissed down my spine while he dragged my soft shorts and panties down to the floor in one swift tug.

"I'll just be over here then," Bennett grumbled, settling himself on the end of the bed to watch the guys strip me with his fiery green gaze.

Noah unhooked my flimsy bralette, and Zach peeled it away and tossed it in the pile accumulating at Bennett's feet. Zach ducked down to pull my nipple into his mouth, and I arched my back to give him better access, my head landing on Noah's shoulder.

"What would you like first, sweetheart?" Noah rasped in my ear as he held me. "After Zach's had his fill of those perfect tits, do you want him on his knees with his tongue in your pussy?"

I moaned as Zach switched nipples. Yes, I wanted that.

"Or," Noah went on after a lingering kiss to the crook of my neck, "do you want Bennett's cock in your mouth? Want to show him who's the boss of him with that wicked tongue of yours?"

Oh, I wanted that too.

I cast a glance over at Bennett, who remained perched on the edge of the bed, his enormous dick in his hand as he stroked it slowly. A smile teased the corners of his lips as he held my stare, the challenge evident in his.

I moaned again as I nodded vigorously.

"Greedy girl," Noah purred. "She wants it all. Let's have Zach warm you up just a little bit, and then we'll finally show Bennett how well you suck cock."

"*Noah*," I groaned. "Your filthy mouth gets me so hot."

I felt him grin up against my neck. “The things we’re going to do to you, sweetheart.”

Zach dropped to his knees and tossed my leg over his shoulder, wasting no time before his tongue was buried inside of me, licking and sucking, his happy growls a heavenly vibration on my heated, aching flesh. Noah held me steady, his hot breath teasing my neck as he whispered praise in my ear, reminding me what a good girl I was and how delicious he knew I tasted for Zach.

All the while Bennett watched, and I sucked in a little gasp when my gaze floated his way again and took in his now naked body, his crew joggers and tight T-shirt in a heap at his feet next to my own discarded clothes. His forearm flexed as his big hand pumped lazily over his dick, and when he caught my desperate stare again, he grinned, taunting me. “I’m waiting, Angel.”

Zach chuckled against my pussy before he finally put me out of my misery, sucking my clit into his mouth and driving two thick fingers into me like a jackhammer, and I fell apart in Noah’s arms.

“Mmm, fuck yes,” Zach rumbled as he stood, sucking his fingers into his mouth before giving me a quick kiss. “Delectable as ever. Now go get him, baby girl.”

He swatted my bare ass as I turned to slink the last few feet to where Bennett sat on the bed, my body still buzzing from coming so hard on Zach’s tongue. I fell to my knees and crawled right between his powerful thighs, and I gave him my biggest doe-eyed stare, like I was a little flower and he was the sun.

His cocky smirk fell away, his nostrils flaring and his eyes hooding as he bit back a moan.

“Not looking good for you already, Spencer,” Noah quipped from behind me.

“I know, man,” Zach added. “There is no greater sight on God’s green earth than our Princess when she’s begging for your cock, but keep it together.”

Bennett blew out a breath before reaching down to gently cup my cheek. “Ignore them, Angel. It’s just you and me right now.”

I let out a pleased hum, then I smacked his hand away from his dick because it was *mine*. I licked him from base to tip, taking great

pains to move oh so slowly, teasing him until I finally wrapped my lips around his head and sucked.

“Angel,” he growled, his hips starting to buck as I licked a little circle around his tip.

“I know what you want, Bennett,” I said in a low husk. “Do it. I can take it.”

I was going to fucking try anyway. This was a massive cock, so I would be leveling up from my previous blow job experience, but I never could back down from a challenge—especially not from Bennett Spencer.

He threaded his fingers into my hair, pulling it loose from my ponytail, and he gripped it just tight enough to take me to the edge of pain before tilting my head to look up at him. “You want me to fuck your face, Angel?”

“Oh, shit,” Zach groaned. In my periphery I could see he’d lost his pants, and he was standing just off to my right, stroking his very hard cock as he looked on.

Noah was on my other side in the same state—gloriously naked, mouthwateringly erect, and looking almost pained at the idea of watching Bennett take my mouth. “You can do it, sweetheart. Open wide.”

I brought my hungry gaze back to Bennett. Then, with great determination, I swallowed as much of that monster as I could, opening my throat and digging my nails into Bennett’s thighs, ceding control.

“*Fuck*,” he swore, his grip on my hair tightening. He pumped his hips, gently at first, then he let his own beast take over, thrusting hard and fast into my mouth. “Perfect,” he rasped after a minute. “So fucking perfect. This mouth is mine, Angel, do you hear me?”

I nodded, tears beginning to leak from my eyes, but he never gave me more than I could handle.

And then it was over too soon.

“Enough,” he barked, yanking me from the floor and right into his lap. I straddled him as he kissed me, ravenous and wild. We made out like eager teenagers while Zach and Noah chuckled knowingly.

“Good effort, Spencer, but I think she won that one,” Noah said.

Bennett ignored him, shifting to toss me on the bed behind us without warning.

“Bennett!” My back hit the comforter, and he crawled on top of me, moving to pin me to the mattress with his big body.

I rolled us before he could settle on top of me like I would have if we were in the cage. Now I pinned him down, and I tutted at him as he bucked his hips in an effort to throw me off. “Easy, Bennett,” I purred. “You’re acting like you don’t want me to ride this dick until I’m choking it.”

He bared his teeth at me, but his eyes were so glazed with lust he almost looked high. “Such a fucking brat, Angel. Behave, and I’ll let you fuck me.”

Noah had crawled onto the bed behind me, and Zach made himself comfortable on his pillow throne at the headboard next to us. I felt Noah’s hands wrap around my hips, and he moved me so that I was hovering over Bennett’s huge erection. “Resistance is futile, Spencer. Let our girl have her ride.” Then he gently lowered me onto Bennett’s dick.

I gasped at the stretch, and Bennett’s guttural groan signaled his surrender as I sank down until he was fully seated inside me.

Noah’s hands came up to cup my breasts, and Zach’s dark gaze drank me in as he fisted his dick, moving his hand in time with the tentative rocking of my hips as I adjusted to Bennett’s girth. Soon that pinch of pain gave way to pleasure, and I began to ride Bennett with gusto, chasing my release and wanting so desperately to pull Bennett’s orgasm from him too.

I was vaguely aware of Zach and Noah shuffling around on the bed as I lost myself in Bennett, but it wasn’t until I registered the telltale *snick* of the lube cap that it dawned on me what they were up to.

Noah’s low voice sounded against my ear. “Fuck, you’re a goddess. Bennett’s never seen a more beautiful sight in all his life than you riding his cock. Right, Spencer?”

I slowed as Noah’s slick finger began to tease at my tight hole, and Bennett groaned in frustration, his brow pinched as he pumped his hips upward. “No,” he grunted. “There’s nothing better than this.”

Noah ran a hand along my spine before gently pushing me forward. I collapsed onto Bennett's chest, now nose-to-nose with him as I continued the slow rock of my hips.

"Bennett," I whispered as Noah kept up his ministrations. "I think Noah's going to fuck my ass while you're still inside me."

He shut his eyes and ground his jaw like he was in real pain, then we both groaned as Noah slid his slick finger into my ass. I dropped down for a kiss, and I busied myself there administering sweet kisses to Bennett and continuing to move my hips, taking the slow-building pleasure as Noah stretched and readied me.

"Fuck me, Princess," Zach said, still watching us avidly. "Hargraves has more patience than I did, that's for sure. But Spencer looks like he's about to die."

Noah chose that moment to begin to push into me, and I buried my face in Bennett's chest to let out a rasping moan.

"Oh fuck," Noah bit out. "Oh, sweet girl, this is so tight. You're doing so well."

Bennett had sucked in an agonized breath at Noah's invasion, but he quickly put his game face back on. He swept my wild hair away from my face and cupped my cheeks with his big hands. "Okay, Angel? We're about to utterly fucking ruin you, but only if you're ready."

I was so full, sandwiched between the hard bodies of two of the three pieces of my heart, any sense of where I ended and they began quickly slipping away. I wanted to get lost. I wanted nothing to exist except me and them, here in Zach's bed.

Wait.

"I'm almost ready," I breathed. I pushed up on Bennett's chest and met Zach's hot, dark stare. Expecting a cocky smirk, all I saw was complete and utter devotion. "*Zach*. I need you."

He was on his knees immediately, shuffling to close the distance between us. He stroked his dick as he looked me over, and I somehow still had the presence of mind to admire the flexing of his defined Adonis belt as he moved. He rumbled, "Princess, are you gonna take all three of us?"

Bennett and Noah started moving inside me, spurring us on. I nodded. "Yes. I can do it, Zach."

“I know you can, baby girl. Never doubted you.”

“You’ve got this, sweetheart,” Noah said, his voice strained. “We’ll hold onto you.”

And they did. Bennett and Noah were a seamless team, keeping me propped at the right height even as they began to fuck me mercilessly, while Zach fed me his weeping cock and began his shallow thrusts in time with the others. He caressed my cheek reverently with one hand even as his grip on my hair with the other was rough and possessive. I screamed around him, and Bennett and Noah quickly threw me into a body-shattering climax.

“Oh, fuck *yes*, Angel,” Bennett growled as I clamped around him.

“Good girl,” Noah panted. “Such a good fucking girl.”

Zach tensed. “Fuck, baby girl. Fuck, get ready for me.”

I managed a nod, then I swallowed around Zach as he followed the three of us over the edge with a hoarse shout.

We fell into a pile of limbs, and the boys took care to move my boneless body into Zach’s waiting embrace.

Bennett had rolled next to us, and I reached for him, linking our hands together. Noah disappeared to the bathroom and returned with wet washcloths for everyone.

I dozed in Zach’s arms, happy and content to listen to the low murmurs of the guys as they chatted, easy and free and apparently not caring in the slightest that we were all still naked.

“Love you all,” I whispered.

Zach kissed my temple. “We love you too, Princess.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

BENNETT



My phone vibrated on Zach's nightstand, pulling me from the deep sleep I'd slipped into after we'd all finally cleaned up and thrown on some semblance of clothing. I'd roused Jolie, who was drowsy and adorable after I'd fucked her into a coma with a little help from her other boyfriends, and put her into the bathtub. Zach, Noah, and I had taken a quick shower, then we'd tucked Jolie in for the night and piled in around her like we so often did.

The clock on my phone read 11:30 p.m. The annoyance at being called at this hour on a Monday night was quickly wiped away by the alarm that jolted me all the way awake when I registered who was calling.

Why was Jolie's dad calling me*?*

"Dom?" I barked into the phone. "What's wrong?"

"Bennett," he said, and his grave tone knocked my heart into my throat. "I need you to remain calm."

Jolie's hand snaked into mine, and I held on like my life depended on it. "Where's my mother, Dom?"

He sighed. I could hear him pacing, the background buzzing with activity. "He's taken her, Bennett."

"*What?*" I shouted.

Everyone was awake around me now, my brain muddling their hushed, urgent whispers as I struggled to grasp what Dom was

saying.

“They ambushed Martinez and your mother a few hours ago when they were walking home together from… an outing.”

A fucking date*, he means*.

“Did they hurt her?” I croaked.

“Not physically, no. But they shot Martinez.”

I was real fucking pissed at Martinez, but shit, I didn’t want him dead.

Jolie gasped next to me. “Did they kill him?”

Dom heard her. “No, he’s in the hospital. They left him for dead in an alley in Olde Town, but he managed to get a call out to us. Kara and I are here with him.”

Deep breaths. “He’s taken her for ransom,” I said dully.

“Likely,” Dom replied. “I’ve put out an all-call to the Shadows, and Zepp’s woken up your team, but listen to me, son”—my heart lifted momentarily at the sound of the man who saved my Angel and for whom I’d developed a deep, sincere respect calling me *son*—“Do not go running off to Spencer Tower right now. I don’t think he’ll hurt your mother. By all accounts, he does care about her.”

“He thinks she’s his possession and nothing more,” I spat.

“Be that as it may, we need time to plan. Zepp reports that every last remaining member of Spencer’s security has been called back to guard the tower. It’s a fortress now.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, hanging my head in my hand. “I’m going to see what he wants, then I want everyone at Knight Tower first thing in the morning.”

“Already done,” he replied. “Tread lightly with your father, Bennett. This is a desperate move from a desperate man.”

“I know.” I paused, then I said, “And… tell Martinez that I hope he pulls through so I can beat his ass.”

Dom chuckled. “He’s known he’s had that coming for a while, don’t you worry.”

I hung up and dropped my phone onto the bed as the familiar numbness crept into my body. My fucking father was hurting my mother yet again, but this time it was to get at me.

Noah had flicked on the light sometime during my call, and I turned to take in the concerned faces of my brothers and my love.

Jolie took my hand again, her stoic silence a sign that she was descending into the same place I was. Noah appeared concerned; Zach just looked pissed.

"I hate it, but you're right," Noah said. "You have to call him."

I picked my phone up again. No sense in delaying the inevitable.

I wasn't scared of my fucking father.

He answered the call immediately. "Hello, son."

"Father."

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your deigning to speak to me?" He sounded almost giddy, and it was fucking weird.

"You know why I'm calling," I snapped. "Your megalomania won't allow you to accept that you're fucking finished in this City, so you've kidnapped Mom to get my attention. You have it now—don't fucking waste it."

He *tsked*. "I don't like that tone, Bennett. That's no way to enter a negotiation—I know I've taught you better than that. Perhaps I was just missing my *wife* and wanted her back home where she belongs."

I scoffed. "You couldn't have given two shits if Mom was home or not except when you needed her on your arm for appearances. What's the matter, Father? Are you missing your simpering fuckbuddy of a private secretary? We did preserve her head when we sent it over, so you should be able to visit her whenever you're feeling nostalgic."

I could feel his anger bubbling through the phone. "That was beneath you, Bennett—wholly unnecessary and *grotesque*. Even if that traitorous bitch is probably the reason you were able to pull this neat little *trick*."

"No tricks, Father. It's truly the end of the road for you. Release Mom or I'll be coming to retrieve her."

"No!" he shouted, and I heard the distinct sound of glass shattering against the wall. "You will release the Spencer companies from this bullshit cyberattack. Once you do that, I will offer you a trade." He paused, and my pulse spiked. "Jolie Knight for your mother, Bennett. The longer you wait, the less patient I'll become, and I might start taking my anger out on your mom."

I trembled in rage. My father had been a shitty husband and certainly emotionally abusive, but he'd never hit my mother or

physically harmed her. “Fuck you,” I bit out. “I will fucking kill you, you son of a bitch.”

“Time’s ticking, son.”

Then he hung up.

I sat there, vibrating, numb, oblivious to my surroundings. It was only when Zach and Noah’s alarmed shouts penetrated my brain that I snapped back into the present.

“No fucking way, Princess.”

“You’ll have to go through us, sweetheart.”

Jolie was in a standoff with Zach and Noah, who were shoulder to shoulder in the doorway of the bedroom. She glared at the two of them, still dressed in just her tiny sleep shorts and silky tank top.

But she did have her knife in her hand.

“Jolie,” I growled. “*No*.”

She whirled to face me, and she pointed at me with her knife. “I heard him, Bennett. He’s going to hurt your mom if I don’t go over there! I’ll go, he’ll release her, then you guys can extract me. The Shadows have had these kinds of contingency plans in place since I started this whole thing!”

I gaped at her. “Are you insane? He will kill you. And then Dom will kill me for letting you do it, and I would fucking let him because *I will not live without you!*”

I’d bellowed that last part, and I sucked in a big, shaky breath as I tried to tamp down the soul-sucking despair at the thought of my father murdering the love of my life *again*. She held my pleading gaze, and finally, the panic and anger melted from her face.

She turned to look at Zach and Noah, who were wearing similar somber, desperate looks, and she sighed. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I just… I can’t let Bennett’s mom suffer because of me. This is *all* because of me.”

“No, sweetheart,” Noah said softly. “This is all because of *them*. Our parents. Not you.”

I opened my arms in invitation, and she trudged back to the bed and crawled into them. I held her close as Zach and Noah climbed back in bed with us. We knew she’d settle easier if we were all there. “Angel, you’re not doing this alone anymore. I’m worried for my mom, too, but I agree with Dom that we need to be prepared. This is

my father's last stand, and I will not let him take you down with him. Or anyone else."

"Okay," she whispered. "I'll feel better when we have a plan."

I kissed her forehead, and Zach pressed his lips to her shoulder as he curled in behind her. I murmured, "Love you, Angel."

As she drifted off to sleep, I glanced over the top of her head to meet Zach's and Noah's stares in the low light. They were both wound as tight as I was, but I could feel our collective tension releasing now that we had our girl contained and not running off headfirst into certain death.

"We'll get through this," Noah whispered.

"Just like we always do," added Zach.

We're the Heirs, I thought reflexively, even though that wasn't true anymore.

"We're *the* Family," I said instead. "The entire City is about to learn once again what happens when you fuck with us."



"*Max*," Jolie hissed into her earpiece. "I will march back down there and beat your ass if you don't hold this crane still."

I couldn't help my satisfied smirk, and one glance at Noah and Zach said they were feeling the same. We'd all grown *begrudgingly* fond of Max in the annoying little brother kind of way, but it didn't change the fact that he was a shit, and it was very satisfying for us when Jolie was the one to snap at him.

"I'm just *adjusting* it, Jojo," he replied with a chuckle. "We want a straight shot onto that balcony for you guys when it's go time."

It was sometime in the middle of the chaotic meeting of the top minds within Knight and the Shadows this morning that the idiotic suggestion was made for our main extraction team to enter Spencer Tower via a large balcony off the fortieth floor—and that we access it via the tower crane conveniently parked next-door.

That main extraction team consisted of Jolie, Noah, Zach, and me, and we were now crouched on the narrow walkway of the crane's horizontal arm while someone had let Max Miller, eighteen-

year-old high school senior, man the controls in the cramped glass cab.

“Hold steady, Max,” Dom’s deep voice said into our ears. “The ground team is getting into position.”

Dom was posted up on the roof of the Serpentis Casino one block over with a couple of other members of the Shadows who had sniper experience. They’d wanted Noah, too, but now that his leg wasn’t giving him grief, he refused to be separated from us.

After a few minutes of silence, Jolie asked, “Any word on Martinez?”

“Yeah, he’s awake,” Dom replied, “and… unhappy that Bridgette was taken. He tried to leave the hospital until we sent Julie down there. I think she’s holding a gun on him so he’ll stay in bed.”

Zach chuckled, nudging me with his elbow. “Sounds like you’ve got a new daddy now.”

He received my stoniest glare, the ambient light of the City’s night life giving us just enough visibility that I knew he did not miss it.

Rocky’s voice crackled online. “North Team is in position and ready.”

Kara was next. “South Team is also in position and ready.”

“Extraction Team will be ready to move at the signal,” Jolie announced.

“And we’ve got the roof covered,” Dom finished. “Currently half a dozen Enforcers guarding the roof entrance.”

“We’re looking at another two dozen at the North entrance and about thirty at the South,” Zepp said over the clicking of his computer keys. “We don’t have eyes in the penthouse, as usual, but prepare for Enforcer presence there, Team Jojo.”

“Got it,” Jolie replied, giving me a knowing nod.

We knew my father would put as many “expendable” hired guns between himself and us as he could get his hands on as Spencer flailed. His vast kingdom had disintegrated and was now slipping through his fingers like sand. He’d played his last card.

But all he’d really done was piss me off and then paint himself into a corner. This was only going to end one way, and I was at peace with it because I’d known somewhere deep within me that

we'd find ourselves here, one way or another, the moment I'd realized my Angel had come back to me.

"On my signal," Dom boomed through our ears. "All teams—*go*!"

The arm of the crane began to move. "Max, slow it down," Noah barked. He stood at the front of our group, ready to direct us to the balcony. "You're going to miss."

"I've got it, Nikolai," he replied smoothly. "Don't worry your adorable little blond head."

We held on for dear life then as Max swung the crane arm toward the fortieth floor of Spencer Tower. The sound of shouting and rapid-fire gunshots echoed into the night air from the ground below us, where our teams had been tasked with distracting and eliminating as much of the tower's main security force as possible while we would sneak in from the middle.

I was pretty sure they were letting Frankie loose in the tower somewhere, too, but he was never on comms, so who the fuck knew.

"Fuck, I think we're gonna make it," Zach said, blowing out a breath as Max settled us just over our target entrance.

"Ye of little faith," Max retorted in our ears. "Hop off, team, because I need to swing this thing back around so it doesn't look too suspicious."

"Thanks, Maxy," Jojo chirped, and she hustled forward to join Noah at the end of the arm. "Be safe, please."

"Back at you, Jojo. *All* of you."

One by one, we climbed over the end of the crane arm and dropped down onto the balcony. I adjusted my gear, then I did a quick sweep of Jolie's kit, reassuring myself she was fully armed and her helmet was on tight.

She caught my anxious perusal, and she smiled softly before she pulled me in for a quick kiss. "I'm ready. We're all ready, Bennett. Let's go get your mom."

And let's go put an end to my father.

Then my Angel would be safe, and I would be free.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

JOLIE



I flicked open the app that Marcus had installed on my phone this morning, then I pressed its face up against the security scanner outside the balcony doors.

"This better fucking work, Marcus," Zach growled into his earpiece. "I am not crawling back onto that crane."

"Of course it'll work," Marcus retorted in our ears. "What? Oh, don't fucking look at me like that, Silver. If you could build a better program, you would've done it already."

"Children," Noah snapped. "Focus."

"Sorry, sir," Silver muttered.

"You two need to fuck already," Zepp chimed in.

"Zepp!" Silver hissed, sounding scandalized.

The scanner beeped with a flash of green light, so we were in and moving on from the bickering of our brilliant tech professionals. Bennett yanked open the heavy glass door, and we followed him into the dark, deserted office that had been James Spencer's base of operations in his law firm.

"Looks like someone had a tantrum," Zach mused, eyeing the sleek computer monitor that was in pieces in the middle of the floor.

"Typical," Bennett grunted. He held up a gloved hand as we reached the office door, and we all paused to listen for anything that could indicate we weren't alone up here. We could make out the faint

sounds of the battle raging outside, spilling into the streets from the lobby on both sides of the building, but the middle floors were silent. Bennett lowered his hand and said in a quiet voice, “Let’s move. There’s an elevator on this floor that has penthouse access.”

We exited the office and treaded silently down the marble-tiled hall, our boots occasionally rustling a paper or file that had been tossed haphazardly on the ground. It appeared that the employees of James B. Spencer and Associates had dropped what they were doing the instant we’d shut it all down and just… left.

When we reached the elevator bank, Bennett jammed his gloved finger angrily into the button. For a moment, the four of us just stood there, milling about, checking our watches or our phones as we waited for the elevator like it was the most normal fucking thing in the world while we ignored the muffled shouting and popping of gunshots in the distance.

The elevator arrived, and we climbed aboard. I raised my phone to the security sensor once again as Bennett smashed the button for the penthouse. The flash of green light said we were a go, and up we went.

“Weapons ready,” I whispered to my boys. “We should have the element of surprise, since they won’t have clocked any of our team leaving the ground floor.”

They all nodded, raising their pistols as the elevator finally came to a stop.

The ding announced our arrival.

“Extraction Team is going in,” I announced into my earpiece.

And then it was on.

We moved quickly, a seamless team, striking at the three Enforcers stationed in the lobby only seconds after they comprehended they were being attacked. Shouts rang out from the living room, and the four guards who rushed into the foyer met the same end.

“Foyer and living room clear,” Bennett barked.

Zach hissed from behind me. “Motherfucker, that stings.”

I whirled, the panic rising into my throat and nearly suffocating me. “Zach! Are you hurt?”

“Bullet just grazed the vest, baby girl,” he replied with a wink that had no business being sexy at this moment. “Totally fine.”

The sound of boots stomping sounded from the floor above us. “We need to move,” Noah said. “They’ll have put out the call to downstairs, so we should expect more Enforcers to try to make their way up here.”

Bennett was already darting toward the stairs, and we quickly fell in behind him. At the first appearance of an Enforcer on the stairs, Noah fired and did not miss. He took down two more before we’d crested the stairs.

“Second floor is clear,” I announced, then I turned to Bennett. “You think he has her upstairs in their bedroom?”

“Likely.”

Dom buzzed into our ears. “Extraction Team, Spencer’s helicopter is landing on the roof as we speak.”

“Shit,” Zach swore.

Bennett was already running for the stairs to the third floor. “Dom, are there still Enforcers on the roof?” he barked.

“We took out all of them but one who's cowering behind a cement pylon. If anyone exits that helicopter and moves into our line of sight, we’ll get them too.”

Our boots pounded on the stairs, all attempts at stealth abandoned the second we stepped off the elevator with guns blazing.

“He’s making a run for it. I’ll fucking kill him,” Bennett growled as he came to a stop on the third-floor landing—the same place Frankie had pulled me back down the stairs and wrestled my pack away from me just a few short months ago.

Being back here again, invading Spencer Tower with my boys at my side, the four of us united in the common goal of eliminating James Spencer once and for all, was a fantastical dream I could never have *dared* to hope for the last time I stood on these steps.

Bennett raced for the main bedroom, and we darted after him. “Where the fuck is that bastard?”

“Here, son.”

James Spencer stepped into the shadows at the doorway to his bedroom. His suit was wrinkled, his tie askew, and his dark hair—so

similar to Bennett's except for the graying at his temples—looked as though he'd yanked it in four different directions.

He also held a trembling Bridgette Spencer in front of him like a shield, his small black handgun pressed to her head.

The four of us froze. No one lowered their weapon, but not even Noah was confident enough to take a shot at Bennett's dad while he hid behind Bridgette.

"Let her go," Bennett snarled. "Your fight is with me, Father."

"I don't think so," he snapped. "I'm not an idiot, Bennett. You've broken into our home, and you've brought your little girlfriend here to finish me off. She's spun you this noble tale of justice while you've had your dick inside her, and now you've destroyed *everything*."

Bridgette struggled, but he only clamped down harder with the arm he had wound around her neck. Her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed, and I wanted to tear her away from that evil fucking man this instant.

"Is John alive?" she croaked at Bennett.

"Shut up," James hissed into her ear. He jerked her into the hallway and began backing around the corner, still holding her in front of his body as he headed straight for the stairs to the roof.

"Martinez is okay, Mrs. Spencer," I said softly, catching her eyes. "He's awake and missing you."

She let out a shaky sigh, giving me the tiniest of nods.

James scoffed, still taking slow steps backward as the four of us inched forward, following them. "You approve of your sweet, innocent mother fucking her bodyguard, son?"

We all knew Bennett did not *exactly* approve of that, but he gave no indication he'd even heard that question as he held his father's glare with the same cold fury he had since the second he stepped out of his shadow. "What's your plan here, Father?" he asked, just the edge of a taunt in his voice. "Despite the fact that you have a gun to my mother's head, I have no intention of handing Jolie over to you, and I have *every* intention of letting your failing business empire stagnate and rot. This little outburst has accomplished nothing."

"It would have if all of these meatheads I pay to guard this tower weren't so fucking worthless!" he bellowed, making Bridgette flinch in his arms. "You'd think that fifty trained guards would at least manage

to eliminate the Knight bitch, if not her *and* your traitorous Heir friends. Then you'd have seen it, son—you'd have seen what a monumental fuckup this whole *thing* was for you." He began to climb the stairs, taking careful steps backward, his gun never leaving Bridgette's head and his hard brown eyes never leaving his son. "We could've left here as a Family, started over with your trust fund and my personal accounts. Maybe someday you would've proved to me that you were truly my son and worthy of the Spencer name."

Rocky's voice sounded in our ears. "Hey, Extraction Team, you've got incoming. We have it mostly contained down here, but we lost four or five of them when they got the distress call from the penthouse. I've sent a group after them, but you guys need to be ready."

"Fuck," Zach muttered. He nodded at Noah, understanding passing between them. "We'll be back, Princess," he said softly.

Noah gave my hip an affectionate squeeze, and they turned to run back down the stairs.

I refused to let my brain touch even for a second on the worry that I might not see them again.

James and Bridgette were at the top of the stairs now, while Bennett and I stood shoulder to shoulder on the bottom step, both of us stalking our prey with singular focus.

"I don't want your fucking name," Bennett growled at his father, taking one more step forward. "You're a craven, murdering narcissist. You're a shitty husband and a prick of a father. Let Mom go, and I'll give you a ten second head start to run to your helicopter like the sniveling fucking coward you are."

James just shook his head like he was disappointed in his son before he moved with some of the stunning catlike speed Bennett possessed. He shouldered the heavy door open and yanked a struggling Bridgette through, shoving her forward and disappearing out of our line of sight.

"Shit!" I yelled. "Dom! Hold your fire. Spencer and Bridgette are on the roof, and we're coming out."

Bennett and I sprinted up the stairs, barreling onto the roof in hot pursuit. The rooftop was brightly lit by both security lights and the

cool blue glow of the obnoxious Spencer trident that jutted from the top of the tower.

Bennett's father continued to shove his mother toward the waiting helicopter, digging one bruising hand into her bicep and the other still holding a gun to her head.

The lone Enforcer left on the roof chose that moment to make a last showing for his boss, popping out from his hiding spot and taking a shot at Bennett and me. We both dropped to the ground, rolling away from each other, and it was all Dom needed for a clear shot.

Dom's gun cracked, the Enforcer dropped, and I jumped to my feet again just in time to see one of the guards that had been hiding in the helicopter open its door to receive a struggling, shrieking Bridgette.

She kicked and flailed, and I fired a haphazard shot at the door of the helicopter, high enough so that I was sure to miss Bridgette. It clanged against the metal, and it startled the guard enough to drop her.

Bennett was also on his feet, sprinting toward them. I continued to fire shots at the side of the helicopter, trying to keep the guards inside at bay.

"Worthless!" James roared at the helicopter. "All of you!"

With one last mighty yell, Bridgette tore her arm from James's grasp and slapped the gun out of his hand. It clattered to the ground at the same moment that Bennett reached them.

Time slowed. My breath hitched and my stomach dropped as Bennett shoved his mom clear of his father and tackled James to the ground. Bennett's bigger body slammed into James's strong but smaller form, and they skidded across the concrete until they crashed into the railing that bordered the tower's roof.

It took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to run to them; instead, I continued to fire shots at the helicopter to keep the guards from exiting and snatching Bennett's mom or hurting Bennett to retrieve his father.

I screamed, "Bridgette! Get behind me!"

My shouts were barely audible over the deafening whirl of the helicopter's blades, but she didn't need to be told twice. She ran for me, and I tucked her safely in between my back and the railing.

“We’ve got the penthouse cleared!” Noah called into my ears. “Zach and I are on the way back up.”

“Rocky’s team is staying on the penthouse entrance inside in case more Enforcers make their way up from the ground,” Zach added.

At the sound of their voices, I released one tiny fraction of the tension I was holding, even as Bennett and his father grappled on the ground like wild animals.

“We’ve still got at least three guards in the helicopter!” I shouted. “Dom doesn’t have a clear shot, and I’m running low.”

Suddenly Max came online. “Delivering you a package, Jojo. Hang tight.”

“What?” I shouted again over the noise.

Just as Zach and Noah burst from the penthouse door, the end of the long metal arm of the tower crane appeared, just peeking over the edge of the roof.

Frankie vaulted from it like fucking Spiderman, his tank top a streak of neon yellow soaring through the sky before he landed on light feet and disappeared behind the helicopter. Within thirty seconds, three bodies were tossed unceremoniously out the bay door, and Frankie’s lithe form appeared in the cockpit.

“Did you know he could fly a helicopter?” I asked Zach as he skidded to a stop beside me.

Zach could only look on with well-worn resignation. “He can’t, as far as I know.”

Frankie tossed us a jaunty salute from the cabin’s window, then I watched, momentarily struck dumb, as the helicopter rose from the roof and disappeared into the night.

Silence settled over the rooftop—until Bennett’s angry roar pierced the air, jerking us back to reality.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

JOLIE



"Penthouse is clear," a voice from Rocky's team announced in our ears.

Kara came on next. "Ground is clear. All Spencer forces have either been taken out or subdued."

"Roof is clear," Dom announced.

"Almost," I clarified in a hushed whisper.

Bennett and his father were on their feet now, circling each other near the railing opposite us. Zach, Noah, and I holstered our weapons, and with Bridgette clinging tightly to Noah's arm, the four of us walked slowly toward them.

We came to a stop a few feet away, and we watched in solemn silence as Bennett exorcised the last of the demons he harbored for his father—and for Spencer.

James' face was bruised and bloody, and he limped a bit as he moved, eyeing Bennett now with open loathing. My beast quieted as I registered that Bennett had only one purpling bruise on his jaw, and his powerful body moved with no signs of serious injury.

"You," James spat, bloody saliva flying from his lips, "are such a disappointment."

Bennett smiled, and he was so *beautiful* like that. "I'm everything you're not, Father, and I'm so fucking proud of that. It's over."

James nodded, and he stilled, suddenly standing tall and adjusting his ruined suit in a way that reminded me so much of his son. “I suppose it is. You’ve taken everything from me, Bennett. But before we part, I’d like to return the favor.”

Bennett frowned.

Then his father moved.

With a shocking speed he must’ve pulled from the deepest, most desperate place inside of him, he lunged for Bennett. Bennett braced for the attack, but not before his father reached for the gun strapped to Bennett’s belt, yanking it free and taking aim right at me.

Shouts rang out. Noah shoved Bridgette behind him and dove for me. Zach jumped from my other side, both of them so fucking brave and so fucking *infuriating* as they tried to take a bullet for me.

I loved them so much, I thought my heart would burst from my chest.

“NO!” Bennett screamed.

His father squeezed the trigger just as Bennett’s big body plowed into him again, knocking his arm to the side. The bullet ricocheted off a concrete pylon and buried itself in the giant Spencer trident, which sparked in anger.

I’d dived on top of my valiant boys, dragging Bridgette down with us. I landed with a thud, sprawled over Zach’s back, and at the sound of one last guttural roar from Bennett, I lifted my head.

Bennett had shoved his father over the side of the railing, taking his gun back in the process. James had caught himself, clinging to the top rail, his feet dangling as he fought to pull himself back up. Bennett stood there, breathing hard, holding the reclaimed gun and aiming it one more time at James Spencer’s head.

“Bennett,” he rasped. “I am your *father*. You wouldn’t.”

“Don’t worry, Father,” Bennett replied, his tone suddenly eerily calm. “Unlike you, I can be a *little* merciful.”

The terror on James’ face was replaced with a smug grin. “I knew you didn’t have it in you.”

Bennett’s answering smile was cold, but his eyes were almost exuberant—the look of a man who knew this was the last time he’d ever have to listen to his own father belittle him. He pulled the trigger just as the blue light of the giant trident flickered and went dark.

His aim was true, and then James Spencer was gone.

Dead *before* he fell the sixty-plus stories to the unforgiving City streets below.

A small mercy, indeed.

Bennett turned back to us. His shoulders sagged, years of tension leaking from his body in a striking, visceral way.

I climbed to my feet, and Zach, Noah, and Bennett's mom followed.

I opened my arms, and Bennett came to me immediately. He buried his face in the crook of my neck, and I held him tight as the others pressed in around us.

"Let's go home, Angel."



"The City feels quiet tonight," Noah said, his voice soft and almost distracted as we both leaned against the railing that bordered our pool deck at the penthouse.

"Mmm," I replied, snuggling closer to him. "I like it."

Maybe it was because it was Wednesday, or maybe the extra humidity in the air was keeping more of the City's residents indoors. Personally, I thought the quiet was more in the look of it—Spencer Tower was now a blackened husk against the backdrop of the starlit river, and Ferrero Tower was the same, save the low red glow of the serpent affixed to its side. There were a few lights on at Hargraves, but most of them would go out, too, when the last of Noah's hired construction crew went home for the evening.

It might have been the first time in seven and a half years that I gazed upon the City's skyline without feeling the echoes of terror and the burning anger I'd nursed all those years.

Zach joined us, giving me a quick kiss before handing me a glass of champagne. He dropped his elbows onto the railing and pressed into my other side. "Feels weird, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," I murmured. "It's ours now, huh?"

"You bet, Princess. If we want it to be."

A laugh sounded behind us. I glanced over my shoulder to where Mari sat, lounging in her bikini and gauzy sarong and gripping her champagne glass between delicate fingers as she and Frankie giggled together. Frankie's pool party attire was his usual—ripped jeans, scuffed Converse, and a white tank top with arm holes cut so big, I could make out almost every detail of the serpent tattoo that wound its way up his torso.

Dom and Laura had commandeered one of the outdoor couches, while Julie and Kara occupied the other one. Max was actually in the pool, sprawled lazily on an inner tube, his tiny swim trunks hiding nothing and his keen gaze rarely leaving Mari and Frankie.

Rocky manned the grill, and Martinez was propped on a pool lounger nearby. Rocky and Dom had schlepped him all the way to Knight Tower earlier this evening so that we could all see with our own eyes that he was alive and well. Bennett may or may not have silently acquiesced to his spending the night in our guest wing with Bridgette, who sat daintily on the end of Martinez's lounger, fawning over him. For his part, Martinez looked much more like a cat who'd gotten the cream than a man who'd been shot in the stomach forty-eight hours ago.

Zach chuckled as I turned back to gaze out at my City. "You think we should expect to be invited to more of these impromptu barbecues at our own pool?"

"Yes," I replied, feeling the wide smile creep across my face. "It feels… right."

Noah reached for my hand. "We can have these people at our pool every day if it makes you smile like that, sweetheart."

"Well, not *every* day, Noah," I replied, squeezing his hand. "And they do need to stop showing up out of nowhere. Zach had only barely cleaned up the mess he'd made between my thighs when my *parents* waltzed into the living room."

Zach shot me an indignant look. "Excuse you, that was not a *mess*. That was my *love* for you."

I snorted, but before I could retort, a big, possessive hand wrapped around my neck.

Bennett turned my head so that he could steal a searing kiss over my shoulder, and I whimpered against his lips. My other boyfriends

groaned at the sound, then Bennett released me, pressing his big hard body up against my back.

“Are you happy, Angel?” he rumbled in my ear.

“I am, Bennett.” I sighed contentedly. “My favorite place in the entire world is being pressed in between the three of you, after all.”

They all groaned again. Bennett leaned down to whisper in my ear, “Don’t talk like that unless you want us to haul you back to bed. I’ll do it in front of our family—I don’t give a fuck.”

Happy tingles raced through my body at Bennett’s declaration that all of these people were our *family*, then I had to smother the other tingles that hit me between my legs at the thought of going back to bed with them—which was where we’d spent most of the day today. We’d needed to be together after the events of last night, and my boys had loved me hard until I was wrung out and deliciously sore.

Noah gave me a knowing grin before he turned back to the City’s skyline. “I can’t believe that after all of this, we have to go back to school tomorrow. Like nothing’s changed.”

But of course, everything had changed.

What I’d set out to do the day I’d finally pulled myself out of Max’s bed and vowed to end the Families—that was finished. But instead of leaving the City in burning ruins like I’d intended, I’d simply cut off its gangrenous limbs. The heart of it remained intact, and now I had something I could make… great.

And I’d do it with my team, my family, and the loves of my life at my side every step of the way.

I could only hope that it would someday look like my mom and dad might have wanted when they envisioned a City where the Families could actually do *good*.

“I *am* looking forward to being a normal college student for a while,” I said to the boys, and they all grunted in agreement. “Though, now that I don’t have any ex-best friends to dupe or evil, murderous oligarchs to destroy, I’m not exactly sure what I’m going to do with myself.”

Noah shot me a dark look full of promises—the reminder of my behavior last semester probably earning me some punishment later,

and I shivered at the thought. Then his face softened as he said, “You’re going to heal, sweetheart.”

“We all will,” Zach added.

“Exactly,” Bennett finished. “Together.”

Together.

EPILOGUE

JOLIE - ABOUT TWO YEARS LATER



"That's it, Princess," Zach rasped into my ear, his rough cheek scraping along the side of my neck. "Fucking come for me."

"Zach, ugh, shit," I whimpered as he thrust furiously between my thighs, my leg hiked up over his hip and my back smashed against the door in Noah's office. "You're going to be late for the lineup."

He chuckled. "Like they'd start graduation without four of the Academy's trustees."

On cue, a fist pounded on the office door. "Hurry the fuck up in there, you two," Bennett growled. "Do not mess up Angel's dress, you fucking animal. Or her hair."

Noah's muttering was barely audible over Zach's heavy breathing in my ear. "Losing battle, dude. Let's not act like we weren't already running late because you decided to ambush Jojo in the shower earlier."

The memory of Bennett slipping into my shower this morning, then bending me over and fucking me into the wall pushed me over the edge, and I screamed Zach's name for the entire administrative wing of Holywell Hall to hear as my climax rocked through my body.

"Yeah, that's fucking right, baby girl," he said with a groan.

He slowed as he finished, all the while taking my lips in a sweet, gentle kiss.

“Finally,” Bennett huffed from outside.

I snickered. Zach’s decision to drag me into Noah’s office and fuck me up against the door ten minutes before graduation began was not that surprising, though it was going to put us even further behind than we already were. Noah had only wanted to swing by his office to grab his favorite tie, but the quiet hallway, locked door, and my flimsy dress had apparently been too big a temptation for my rules-breaking-est boyfriend.

After cleaning me up like a gentleman, Zach righted my dress and zipped his graduation robe back into place. He picked his cap up off the floor and stuck it back on his head, and he still somehow made it look lazy and disheveled. He smirked at my perusal of him as he adjusted his tassel.

We opened the door and stepped into the hall, and we found Bennett and Noah both looking very dapper in their caps and gowns. Noah shot me a knowing smile, while Bennett rolled his eyes.

“Nice going, Ferrero,” Bennett groused. “She’s got that just-been-fucked flush, and your beard burn is clear as day on her neck.”

I snuck into Bennett’s arms and pulled him in for a kiss, and he melted into me without any more fussing. “Relax, Bennett,” I said with a big smile. I fluffed my hair around my shoulders to hide the aftermath of Zach’s rough cheek against my pale skin. “See? Good as new. Now we need to move, unless Noah also needs his graduation present before you guys walk that stage?” I tossed Noah a coy smile.

He grinned. “Absolutely not. I want mine later. In your bed. For several hours. These idiots need to learn some patience.”

None of my boyfriends were really *that* patient, but Noah certainly had the most… discipline.

The other two grumbled while I smoothed my pale pink dress. I was feeling very girly and emotional today, so my dress color suited my mood.

I turned to beam at the three of them. “Let’s go get you boys graduated.”



I waved at Mari from my seat at the front of the dining hall, which had been cleared of its banquet tables and instead filled with rows of folding chairs facing a small stage at the front of the room. Mari, as an “A” last name, was first in line on the little stairs to the side.

“I’m gonna miss her and Carmen being on campus all the time,” Max pouted from his seat next to me.

I elbowed him. “You still have *me*, your loving sister.”

He grinned. “You mean my loving *roommate*.”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t help the little grin that tugged at my lips. Max would move in with me next year for my senior year—his junior—at Holywell. I’d stayed true to Mari and remained her roommate for three glorious years. But with my boyfriends finally graduating and clearing out of the A Dorm penthouse, I was taking it over, and Max would join me. It wasn’t quite our shared bunk room back at our apartment over the bookstore, but I was actually looking forward to living with my brother again.

Though we were going to need to have a discussion about the *entertaining* I was certain he’d be doing in his room.

“I hope you’re excited for me to be all in your business about keeping your grades up,” I added.

“Ugh, why?” he moaned. “You basically run this place. You’d never keep my degree from me.”

That was not exactly true, but as a trustee, I did have a lot of sway over the things that went on at Holywell, including the expansion of the scholarship program, the overhaul of the admissions criteria to move beyond a student’s last name and how much money their family had, and, of course, the hiring of the new dean.

I watched as Dean Foley toddled up to the stage to begin his opening remarks. He was a tiny man with a hunched back, wispy white hair, and a mind as sharp as his smile. He was not from the City, so he didn’t give one iota of a fuck about anyone’s family name. Our previous dean, Harper’s mom, had gotten the boot at the end of my freshman year due to the many scandals plaguing the Jansen family. They left the City shortly after the fall of Spencer, and the last I’d heard, they’d run off to New York to beg for a role in Edward

Jansen's second-cousin's investment firm. They'd also stuck Harper in some small, isolated women's college upstate to finish her degree.

Dom nudged me from my other side where he sat with Laura. "I can't believe in one short year, I'll be watching you cross that stage."

"Don't get all sentimental on me, old man," I whispered.

He laughed. "I mean, I'm not sure I was convinced either of my children would graduate college back when we'd planned to ditch the City with your inheritance. Our days were going to be surf lessons and seafood."

I hummed. "Are you disappointed they aren't?"

"No, honey," he replied, reaching over to squeeze my hand. "You've made this place something great, and you have the loves of your life. In my wildest dreams, I couldn't have imagined you so happy."

I felt a tear well up, but I blinked it away. Too early in the ceremony for that shit.

"And we're just overrun with sons!" Laura added, leaning around Dom to smile at me and Max. "It's good for Dom. It keeps him young."

Dom grumbled something about getting enough testosterone at the gym already, then the dean began to announce the names of our graduates.

Mari stepped across the stage first, moving effortlessly in her towering Mary Jane heels. She waved at us as she received her diploma, then turned to look back over at the line of students waiting to graduate. She blew a kiss at Carmen, who beamed and waved excitedly.

As Mari exited the stage, she sent a polite nod to the chairs somewhere behind us, where I presumed her parents had found seats.

Mari's relationship with her parents was on the mend, but they still had a long road ahead. As Knight flourished in the months following the end of the rule of the Four Families, she did decide to bring the Anzaldua hotel empire into our fold. She'd stepped into the role of co-CEO with her mother, and they had a polite and functional business relationship. Unfortunately, Mari's parents still couldn't manage to completely hide their disapproval of Mari's public

relationship with Carmen, so for now, polite and functional was all it would be.

I'd made it my mission for Carmen to start her junior year of college at Holywell instead of continuing at her Spanish university. It only took a partial scholarship and a personal phone call from yours truly to her parents, but I would've flown across the ocean and kidnapped her myself if I'd had to. Zach had even offered to plan it all out, the psycho.

The two of them were still very much in love and would be moving into Mari's apartment in Knight Tower after graduation. Mari would continue her work in our hospitality group, and Carmen would be starting her job on Silver's team after interning with her last summer.

I loved having all my people close.

Max and I waved enthusiastically at Carmen as she trotted across the stage a few minutes later, and then it was time for the first former Heir of the City's Four Families to cross the stage.

Zach Ferrero received his diploma to a rousing round of applause. His dark eyes found mine, and he winked at me. There was so much love in that cocky smile that overwhelmed me in that moment, and I blinked back tears again.

"Ugh, tell Ferrero we didn't *all* need to see his bedroom eyes," Max complained, but he squeezed my thigh affectionately as he said it. He knew Zach was a part of my heart, and the two of them were pretty much besties even if neither would ever admit it out loud. Max and Zach's love language was beating the fuck out of each other in the cage.

After some time spent getting his sea legs, Zach was now running what was the successor to the Ferrero Family empire like he was born to do it—because he was. He'd taken a page from Noah's book and turned Ferrero Tower into his own personal project to better the City, and it now housed a boarding school for at-risk youth and the offices of several community-based organizations.

His pet project, though, was his gym. Andrea had demolished the last of the public housing in the City to build a parking garage for the Club, so Zach decided to give that back to the City—in a way, at least—by using that space to open a gym similar to Dom's. It catered

to the struggling teens raised in the violent underbelly of the City that used to end up in the Snake Pit, trying to make a buck. He hired Rocky to run it, and it was truly an amazing place.

As Zach exited the stage, he nodded at Gemma, who sat in the row behind us. Zach's estranged aunt had slowly tiptoed her way back into Zach's life, calling occasionally and visiting the City twice more since she'd pulled the trigger ending the life of the vile woman who'd murdered both my mother and Zach's father. We were looking forward to visiting her chalet in Switzerland over the holidays this year, and Max had already spent a fortune on snowboarding gear in anticipation.

Zach stopped along the wall of the hall to shake hands with Frankie, who definitely hadn't been there thirty seconds ago. I darted a glance at Max, whose heated gaze was now squarely aimed in that direction, a knowing smirk on his face.

Only a few graduates separated Zach from the next former Heir to ascend the stage. Noah Hargraves lit up the room with his lovely smile, his big blue eyes shining behind the dark brown frames he wore today. He accepted his diploma, then those eyes searched for me in my spot on the front row.

I beamed at him, and he blew me a kiss. The pride I felt at watching *my* Noah graduate at the top of his class had me bursting, and I thanked all the deities of the world that he would still be around campus next year, taking graduate classes and teaching.

It meant I'd get to pay him some more visits in his office to request extra credit.

"God, the way Nick looks at you is going to get *me* pregnant—ow, fuck," Max groused as I elbowed him for the tenth time. Then he muttered, "I hope he's at least going to start putting a tie on his office door or something when you guys are fucking in there. I don't need to be scarred for life when I need help with my fucking advanced computer science homework—*ow*."

I rolled my eyes, though I couldn't help my smile. Noah was both proud and annoyed by Max's increased presence in his orbit because of Max's computer science major, and it was yet another bromance that neither of them would ever cop to but was one hundred percent a thing.

Noah planned to keep his Academy obligations part-time so he could run his healthcare empire the rest of the time. His hospital and clinic serving low-income citizens in Hargraves Tower flourished, and he enjoyed his positions on the boards of several up-and-coming businesses in the healthcare tech space.

He also enjoyed tying me to the bed and edging me until I begged him for mercy while Zach and Bennett watched. Noah was a man of diverse interests and hobbies.

He was so happy, so focused, that he often forgot about his father. Peter hadn't left Thailand, but he'd had to pay off a fair few of his more unsavory creditors over the years and had only narrowly avoided a stint in Thai prison.

And his numerous calls to Noah, presumably to beg for money, always went unanswered.

When Bennett finally strode across the stage, his presence commanded the attention of the entire hall. He towered over every person around him, and his broad chest and wide shoulders were prominent even in his gown. He accepted his diploma from the dean with the same intense, serious energy he gave to most tasks, and I could sense every eye in the room was glued to him as he marched off the stage with a purpose.

He was, after all, the former Spencer Heir, the son of the deceased king of the City, James Spencer, whose tragic fall from the roof of Spencer Tower had been splashed across every news site in the country.

Bennett's heavy stare landed on me as he turned to walk back to his chair. Only he could strip me bare with a mere glance, and I felt myself flush from my cheeks to my chest as those eyes burned into me before he shifted his gaze down the row to his mother.

His face softened for her, and a tiny smile graced his lips at her exuberant waving in his direction. Brigette was now as happy and healthy as Bennett could have ever wanted, and he'd even finally come around on Martinez, who was head over heels for Bridgette and pretty much attached to her hip.

Though anyone who suggested Bennett call Martinez his daddy received a look that could flay flesh from bones.

Unlike my other two loves, Bennett had washed his hands completely of what was left of the Spencer empire. He'd tossed out anyone who'd ever floated even remotely close to James Spencer's inner circle, then he sold everything off to buyers we'd thoroughly vetted. It wasn't what he wanted to do with his life—"Fuck banking and finance," he'd said—so now the man who was once my most rigid, strait-laced, corporate-world-bound best friend had no concrete plans after graduation.

And he liked it.

Bennett was richer than sin and wouldn't need to work a day in his life, but I'd insisted he find something to busy himself with that wasn't his preferred activity—watching me. I assigned him a spot on the board of the Knight Foundation because if there was one thing Bennett knew how to do, it was spend money. The Foundation had more funds to give away than it knew what to do with from even the small fraction of a stake it had retained in my dad's miraculene research, and Bennett seemed excited to start giving it all away to charities and causes that struck his fancy.

And maybe, on the days he wasn't doing that, or working out at Dom's, or stalking me around the Academy, he might visit our park.

Bennett had ordered Spencer Tower demolished as soon as it had been cleared of its occupants. He'd wanted that blight removed from the City's skyline, ridding us of the reminder of the man who'd orchestrated the murder of my parents and countless other atrocities. In its place stood a riverside park—a gorgeous green space surrounded by cherry trees and containing flower-lined sidewalks, benches, and a small playground.

He'd named it Angel Park.

I turned into an emotional wreck almost every time we visited. Bennett's love for me—and mine for him—was something so profound, something so powerful and deeply ingrained within our souls, that I marveled over how I'd ever thought I could live without him.

At long last, the dean wrapped up the ceremony, congratulated our Class of 2025, and then caps flew into the air to cheers and applause.

My boys converged on me, and I managed to steal a kiss from each of them before pulling them in close. They surrounded me, their hands on my body as I tried to find purchase on each of them, and the boisterous noise of the room fell away as we stood together, my boys and me, quietly absorbing it all.

It was the end of our time together as Holywell students. Our journey back to each other began right here in this dining hall less than three years ago. I came here to deceive my old best friends, to steal from them, to begin my quest to destroy their Families in the name of the parents that had been stolen from me.

And I'd done it. *We'd* done it. None of it had brought my parents back, but the emptiness I'd expected to feel for the rest of my life once I'd gotten my revenge had been filled with *them*.

I was whole, because this journey brought me back to Zach, Noah, and Bennett. We had each other, and we had our City.

"I love you guys," I said with only the slightest crack in my voice from inside our huddle. "I'm so proud of you."

"We love you, too, sweetheart," Noah replied, his long fingers threading through mine.

"Forever and always, baby girl," Zach said.

Bennett's stare burned into me one more time as he tilted his head down to press his forehead to mine. He whispered, "Ours."



BENNETT

I stared at my reflection in Jolie's bathroom mirror, finally loosening my tie after the end of a long fucking day.

We'd graduated. Once upon a time, this day was supposed to come with the tiniest hint of freedom for my brothers and me—access to our trust funds, a little more power, and a lot more responsibility within the Families. I'd looked forward to it with equal parts excitement and dread.

Then my Angel returned to me, rid the City of the cancer that was the Four Families, and changed the course of my life forever.

Now it was only her.

So instead, this day had come with a huge party thrown at our penthouse pool with our loving family members and true friends. I now had a bright future that was mine to do whatever the fuck I pleased with it.

First, I would be finally taking off this suit and curling my body around Jolie while I slept for twelve straight hours.

I'd just begun unbuttoning my shirt when I heard, "Oh, holy *fuck*, Princess," from the bedroom.

Curious, I wandered out of the bathroom and froze.

Joanna Miller stood in the bedroom doorway, her smile wicked as she passed that violet gaze over the three of us. She'd dyed her hair and eyebrows the same dark brown from her first semester at Holywell, and she wore ripped jeans, a purple tank top, and her ratty sneakers that I'd tried to get her to throw away for years now with no luck.

I could only gape at the mirage of the girl who'd stirred up so much fucking trouble that semester while she snuck around behind our backs.

"What's this, sweetheart?" Noah asked cautiously from his seat on the bed.

She took a few slow steps forward. "It's a graduation present, Noah. I thought you guys might like to fuck Joanna Miller, since all three of you apparently harbored that dirty fantasy back when I first came to Holywell."

I swallowed as I felt my dick wake all the way up. "You mean we wanted to fuck some goddamn sense and manners into her," I growled.

Those purple eyes met mine in an achingly familiar challenge. "Come and get it, then, Spencer."

I tossed my shirt from my shoulders and ran for her. Zach and Noah were quick to follow.

We didn't let Jolie rest until the early hours of the morning. My Angel never did learn sense or manners, but she had my heart forever, anyway.

THE END



Curious about Frankie and Max? Their spicy novella is available now!

BONUS SCENE

BENNETT - EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Oh, look who I've caught," I said as I pressed *Joanna Miller* into the bedroom wall with my entire body. She sucked in a startled breath, those violet eyes widening in shock even as they glazed over with a sheen of lust. I wrapped a firm hand around her throat, thrusting her chin upward so that she was looking me right in the eyes as I said, "It's the Southside troublemaker. Breaking into the *Heirs*' penthouse. Were you trying to steal from us?"

I felt her vibrating under me, her nipples hardening into diamond points beneath her threadbare tank top and brushing against my bare chest.

She was into this.

I smirked over my shoulder at Zach and Noah, both of whom had managed to at least get their shirts off and were now watching her like a couple of starving wolves.

It appeared the three of us weren't the only ones who had harbored a little dirty fantasy back when Jolie was hiding from us in plain sight, trying desperately to hate us for what she'd thought we'd become.

She feigned a struggle under me, and I turned back to her, pinning her with the sternest glare in my arsenal. "You're ours now, little girl. You don't break into our sanctuary without consequences."

"Fuck you, Spencer," she spat. "Get your arrogant fucking hands off me."

She bared her teeth at me in a way that made me want to take her mouth with mine, but I refrained. The Bennett Spencer of Joanna

Miller's freshman year wouldn't have allowed himself to kiss his little problem-causing obsession.

Not on the mouth, anyway.

Instead, I leaned in, inhaling her sweet scent as I squeezed her delicate throat just a little tighter. "Make me," I whispered.

In a flash, she broke my hold on her body and shoved me back with a hard strike to my solar plexus, which I expected and absorbed easily—the result of many training sessions in the cage with my Angel over the years. She bolted toward the door like she was making her great escape, except Zach pounced, catching her around the middle and tackling her to the floor.

"Ah, ah, ah, Princess," he cooed as he pinned her down, rolling her onto her stomach as she thrashed. He gathered her arms behind her back and straddled her perfect ass. "You have some explaining to do. You can't just sneak into our room and expect us to let you run off."

She stifled a moan as Zach let his obvious erection slide against her ass while he held her down, then she rasped, "If you want to keep that dick attached to your body, Ferrero, you'll get the fuck off me right this second."

He chuckled. "The idea of you touching my dick in any capacity is too tempting, Princess."

I leaned against the wall, doing my best looming as I looked on. "Put her on her knees, Zach. She can beg us to forgive this gross invasion of our privacy."

Grinning like a loon, Zach eased off Jolie's back while keeping a hold of her wrists. He wrapped his free arm around her torso and pulled her to her knees, pressing her tight to his chest. Noah stepped in front of her while I kept my post against the wall a few feet away.

I crossed my arms and arched an impatient brow at her, drawling, "I'm waiting."

She glared at us, the blazing fire in those violet eyes a *very* familiar sight. "I'm sure you rich pricks are used to all the Family ass-lickers falling to their knees to beg you for a kernel of your precious attention every damn day, but I don't give a fuck who you are. I don't take orders from you."

Noah tutted, dropping to kneel in front of her so that the two of them were eye to eye. He gave her his soft-but-stern professor look, which would have annoyed the shit out of Joanna Miller, while I knew for a fact it made Jolie Knight gush like Niagara Falls.

"Joanna," he said softly, reaching up to cup her cheek. She kept her glower in place like a champion even as she subtly sagged into his touch. "I have to say, I'm disappointed. I thought you and I were… becoming friends? At least developing a mutual respect. And yet, here you are, breaking into our home like a common criminal."

"I am not a fucking criminal," she retorted, failing to hide her shiver as Noah ran his thumb gently back and forth across her cheek. I had no doubt the Noah Hargraves of Jolie's freshman year would've done exactly the same thing had he been given the opportunity to put his hands on Joanna Miller.

"Not a common one," I said, smirking down at her. "I think you're a *sophisticated* criminal, Miss Miller. But you're no match for us."

"Mmm, you're caught, baby girl," Zach said into her ear.

Noah searched her face like he was cataloging every detail. "Did you want our attention, sweetheart? Is that why you broke in here?"

She smirked. "I didn't need to break into your ivory tower to get your attention, Hargraves. You three assholes won't leave me alone even though you supposedly despise my very existence."

Noah frowned like a disappointed teacher, and Zach chuckled at Jolie's resulting shiver in his arms. "That's not very nice, Miss Miller. We do not *despise* you. Perhaps we should prove it to you?"

"Great idea, man," Zach said. "Princess wanted our attention, and she has it. We should show her what it means to have the *undivided* attention of the Heirs of the Four Families."

All three of them glanced up at me, awaiting my approval. Jolie's sulky glare—always such a brat—made my dick painfully hard. Noah and Zach had amused looks on their faces, like they were wondering how I was going to play this.

I looked at my Angel. "I said there would be consequences, and I meant it. Zach's going to eat your pussy while Noah fucks that smart mouth, and they're not going to let you come until I say so."

"Fuck," Zach groaned under his breath. We all loved to go down on our girl, but Zach was especially voracious about it. *You're*

welcome, asshole.

Noah arched an eyebrow at me, and I smirked back. Sometimes I liked to take control from him when we were all together like this, but he'd wrestle it back eventually. Jolie loved the push and pull.

Jolie stifled a moan as Zach began to nibble on the pale skin of her neck. "You three don't have the—*mmm*—balls," she protested, her voice husky. "You wouldn't dare fuck the slum trash with those gold-plated dicks. Wouldn't want you to catch—*oh fuck*—a case of *poor*."

Noah had removed her shirt and was now playing with her nipples through the flimsy excuse for a bra she wore. Zach ran his tongue down the length of her neck as he reached around her to unbutton her jeans. She arched into his body, a tiny moan escaping her, and she lost the battle with pretending to hate us for a few seconds as she jerked Noah's face to hers. He groaned his approval against her lips as they made out with enthusiasm.

"Look at that," I said, palming my aching cock as I watched. "Joanna Miller isn't too good for the Heirs after all. She'll beg for our dicks like the Tier One Holywell girls she hates so much. She knows *no one* will fuck her better than we can."

"Fuck you, Spencer," she retorted, managing to pull her mouth from Noah's as he kissed along her jaw, the breathiness of her voice taking any real bite away. "If a Holywell skank touches your dick, I'll slit her throat."

I rumbled my approval. "That's more like it. Tell us more, baby."

Zach had removed her jeans completely, and she squealed as he shredded her panties with an effortless jerk of his fist. "Sit on my face, Princess, and tell us how much you covet our cocks. How much you want to make them yours."

He flopped down onto his back, and Noah moved Jolie's now naked, pliant body to straddle his head. Zach wrapped his hands around her hips and jerked her pussy to his face, and she let out a long, low moan.

Noah cupped her face again with the hand that wasn't gripping his dick. "You heard the boys. Open those eyes, sweetheart. Before you wrap those sweet lips around my cock, tell us what you'll do to any woman who dares touch the Heirs."

Her gorgeous eyes fluttered open, hooded in pleasure as Zach continued his efforts between her legs. “If one of those bitches touched any of you, I would cut off their soft little hands before I dangled them by their hair from the top of A Dorm. Then I would drop them onto the concrete below and bask in their screams while each one of you bent me over the railing and fucked me one right after another until I couldn’t remember my name.”

All three of us groaned. That was Jolie Knight speaking, but it wasn’t a stretch to imagine that Joanna Miller would’ve been just as possessive of us back then—though she would’ve died before she ever admitted it.

My dick was hard enough to pound nails. It was fortunate for Angel that Zach and Noah were going to warm her up for me because I was going to absolutely fucking ruin her when it was my turn.

“That was perfect, sweet girl,” Noah purred, and Zach growled something unintelligible in agreement from between her legs. “Why don’t you ask Spencer if you’ve earned an orgasm?”

She glanced at me, her jaw dropping in a silent moan at whatever Zach was doing, then she gasped. “He’ll say no. He wants me to work harder.”

Fuck, I loved her. “Our Southside troublemaker is correct. Noah wants his dick sucked. Impress me, Miss Miller, then I’ll consider letting you come.”

“Did you hear that, Ferrero?” Noah called down to Zach. “Ease up, she’s already shaking.”

Zach reappeared from between Jolie’s thighs with a disappointed grumble. He rolled to sit on his ass next to Jolie while Noah stood up, positioning his dick right in front of her face.

Jolie gave Noah a loving stroke before she looked over her shoulder at me, a challenge in those violet eyes. “Ready to be impressed, Spencer?”

“Show me.”

With one last evil grin at me, she turned to Zach. “Stand up, Ferrero.”

Zach shot to his feet, and within seconds his dick was free from his sweatpants and in Jolie’s other hand. She knelt in front of them,

her lithe body lit by the soft glow of her bedroom chandelier, giving me a prime view of her perky ass. Then she swallowed Noah down and worked him to his breaking point before switching to Zach and giving him the same treatment.

Zach and Noah watched her with the awe of two men who had glimpsed heaven—an unabashed demonstration of how the three of us had felt since the second we realized our Jojo had returned to us. In those few minutes, we weren't Joanna Miller and the Heirs but Jolie Knight and her men. We could never pretend she was anything but the heart that beat for our group and the reason my brothers and I got out of bed each day.

"Fuck me, baby girl, this mouth is sinful," Zach groaned. "I'm close."

"Me too," Noah added, his nostrils flaring and his jaw grinding as Jolie switched back to him. "Better ask Bennett where we should put it."

I appreciated his pretending to let me steer. Jolie tossed me another defiant look over her shoulder, her fists still working the guys in synchronous strokes as she arched a brow and said, "What'll it be, Spencer? Should the boys mark the Southside trash as theirs?"

I glared at her, acting affronted by her presumption but in reality chafing at anyone calling my Angel "trash"—even her. "They'll come on your tits, and you'll fucking thank them and ask for more."

Heat soaked into those purple eyes, and she turned to give each of the guys one last lick before they both groaned their releases, coating her chest and stomach.

"Beautiful, sweetheart," Noah huffed through labored breaths. He bent to give her a languid kiss before taking off to the bathroom to grab a towel.

Zach chuckled, admiring their mess. He pulled Jolie to her feet, wrapped a hand around her neck, then yanked her to him, their lips smashing together in a filthy kiss.

She sighed happily against his mouth, and he refused to release her even when Noah returned with a washrag, angling her body toward him so he could gently clean her up.

After a long minute, Noah was finally able to dislodge Jolie from Zach, placing two firm hands on her shoulders and turning her to

face me as he said, “Well, Miss Miller, I would give that effort a solid A, but we left Spencer over there in charge of whether you get to come. You’ll have to ask him for the verdict—and for his dick. Zach and I… need a minute.”

“I left her fucking soaked between her thighs, man,” Zach said, smirking at me. “It would be a crying shame to waste.”

Jolie lifted her chin, holding my gaze with all the obstinate fire I remembered from our first confrontation in the halls of the Holywell Academy boathouse. “You scared, Spencer? Scared you’ll like fucking the slum girl? Afraid of how perfect this pussy would take that huge cock I can see trying to escape your fancy fucking suit pants?”

I stalked slowly toward her, unbuttoning said suit pants and dropping them to the floor as I went. I stepped out of them as I reached her, my dick now in my hand. Her gaze dropped, hungry as she watched me slowly stroke my cock. “I’m not *scared* of anything, *Joanna*,” I said, my voice quiet and full of dark promises. “You’re going to come on my *gilded* cock, and you’re going to scream my name until you’re fucking hoarse. That is your punishment for daring to invade our home. I know how much you’re going to *hate* that it’s the Spencer Heir that’s making you come harder than you ever have in your life.”

She sucked in a breath, and her eyes were on mine again as she began to take careful steps back toward the bed, beating a not-so-hasty retreat as I prowled after her. Noah and Zach stepped aside, excited grins on their faces and their underwear back on over their spent dicks that I knew from experience would wake right back up again after they watched me demolish our Angel’s pussy.

Jolie’s thighs hit the edge of the bed, and I crawled over her, nudging her backwards until she was comfortably settled against the nest of pillows she kept on her gigantic bed.

I couldn’t resist slipping from our roleplay for a few precious seconds as I dipped to kiss her, and I felt her smile against my lips. “I love you, Angel,” I whispered like I was telling her a secret.

Her face softened. “I love you too.” She threaded her fingers through my hair, gripping the strands in a tight fist. I groaned, then she murmured loud enough for Zach and Noah to hear from where

they now lounged on either side of us, “Now fuck me like I’m the slum trash you hate.”

I groaned again while Zach whistled. “*Fuck*, Princess.”

With a possessive snarl, I flipped her over onto her stomach, shoved her face into her pillow with one hand, hiked her hips up in the air with the other, and buried my aching cock in the nirvana that was her hot, slick pussy.

She screamed into her pillow as I bottomed out, then I fucked her with everything I had.

No easing into it.

No buildup.

No gentleness.

“Oh, you’ve done it now, sweetheart,” Noah said, chuckling from somewhere in the immediate vicinity. “You don’t know how badly Spencer’s wanted this. How many times we suspect he’s jacked himself to the thought of our mouthy new scholarship student. How much he hates that he wants you.”

“*Fuuuck*,” she moaned, shoving her ass harder against me as she fisted her pillowcase with white knuckles. “Oh my *God*, I’m going to come already. His dick is going to break me apart.”

I pounded harder. My balls tightened, and sweat beaded my brow from the delicious pain of holding back even as she clamped tight around me.

“I feel you, baby,” I rasped. “I fucking feel you choking the shit out of my cock.”

“Come for us, Princess,” Zach urged, smoothing a hand over her hair. “You’re ours now.”

Noah reached between her legs, rubbing her clit with gentle strokes. “Let it go, sweetheart.”

She screamed again, her inner walls clamping down on my cock with a vice grip, her body taut and shaking underneath me. I couldn’t have held back my release if I’d prayed to every deity in recorded history, and I followed her over the edge with a tortured shout.

As I came down, Jolie sagged underneath me. I pressed my forehead between her shoulder blades as I caught my breath.

This would never get old—giving the love of my life pleasure beyond her wildest dreams while my brothers, who loved her with

every piece of their damaged souls, basked in her sweet cries just as they did when they were the reason for them.

Finally, I coaxed my cock from his home, then I took my turn cleaning up my mess so that Jolie was free to relax. She was now curled up in Zach's arms, running her fingers lazily through Noah's hair.

When I finished wiping her down, I leaned in to steal one last kiss. "Rest up, Angel. That was only the beginning."

Noah grinned. "I'm next. Joanna Miller has mouthed off to her Tech Skills TA one too many times this semester, and she needs to be taught a lesson."

Jolie huffed out a little laugh, sleepy and sated. "Whatever you say, Professor."

Zach nibbled on her ear. "If you have energy left after that, I think 'Fight Night' is going to end with me pinning you to the mat and fucking you until you beg me for mercy."

She nodded, humming. "Mmm, yes, that too." She looked at each of us once more with those violet eyes, her soft smile so full of love, it made my chest ache. "Happy graduation. I love you all so fucking much."

"We love you too, Angel."

"Always, Princess."

"Forever, sweet girl." Noah crawled from the bed and stood at the foot, adjusting his glasses before crossing his arms over his chest. "Now… on your knees, please, Miss Miller."

THE END (AGAIN!)

Don't forget to grab Max & Frankie's novella! We'll see them get up to some sexy shenanigans, and we'll get to hang out with our faves from the trilogy again.

Did you like Jolie's vibe? You might also like Mave Fortune, my rejected mates shifter romance featuring a badass alpha wolf heroine!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since we're coming up on a year since *Storm the Gates* released, I decided to write some fresh acknowledgements for this omnibus edition of the *A Knight's Revenge* trilogy, because what a ride, y'all.

Jolie is my absolute favorite kind of heroine to read and write, and I don't think I can put into words the joy and excitement I had writing this series—*Storm the Gates* in particular. It was so, so much fun, and I hope to someday experience it again with a new badass lady in a fresh world.

I want to first thank the Why Choose romance community for accepting a new author with open arms. While I both read and write all kinds of romance (M/F, M/M, Why Choose, both paranormal and contemporary), but there is something special about the tight-knit community that is the Why Choose readers and authors. I am thrilled to have become a part of it!

Thank you to my ARC team, who I finally managed to corral in a Facebook group/email list. The enthusiasm you guys have for my stories still blows me away, and it helps me remember why I'm doing this whole writing thing on the hard days.

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And of course, thank you to my husband for the love and support.

ALSO BY ELIZABETH DEAR

Blackstone Academy

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Mave Fortune: A Rejected Mates Story *(M/F)*

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A Knight's Revenge World

Max and Frankie: A Knight's Revenge Novella (M/M)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Dear is the super-secret alter ego of a chick who just wants a little romance and adventure in her life every now and then. She's writing the books she would want to read as an indie romance fanatic and voracious reader and is developing her brand of smart-mouthed heroines, sexy supportive men, and strong family bonds. She loves ALL the tropes and only hopes you enjoyed the ride. Please follow her at the links below to keep up with the latest news.

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