

ELIZABETH DEAR

SEIZE THE CASTLE

A KNIGHT'S REVENGE

HOLYWELL

2

ACADEMY



SEIZE THE CASTLE

A KNIGHT'S REVENGE

BOOK TWO

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ELIZABETH DEAR



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*To Morgan aka Morgie. I'm so glad you messaged me on Instagram,
and I'm thrilled to now call you my friend. Your care with my words
has helped to make this story special.*

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SYNOPSIS

In Saint Gabriel City, there's a war brewing.

The Four Families have ruled the City for generations, but they made a huge fucking mistake when they murdered my parents and didn't manage to kill me too.

I've revealed my true identity, taking the City and Holywell Academy by storm, but the heads of Spencer, Hargraves, and Ferrero continue to underestimate me. They think I'm an annoying little gnat trying to play at being an Heir, and that will make it all the sweeter when I take everything from them.

But their sons—the boys who were my best friends for eleven years—they have different ideas about me than their parents do.

Zach wants me back—and maybe just plain *wants* me.

Noah longs for our friendship but feels hurt by my lies.

And Bennett—he'll resist my attack on his legacy until the bitter end, but he'd still rather die than lose me again.

And me? I'm starting to think I need my boys back with me after all.

But they'll have to choose—it's me or the Families.

Because I came to burn it all down, and nothing is going to stand in my way.

*This is a New Adult, college-aged dark academy romance. It is the second book in a trilogy and does end on a cliffhanger. It is also a "why choose" romance, which means our heroine will have multiple love interests, and she will not have to choose between them to get her happy ending. As always, this series is for readers age **18+** and*

contains a ton of foul language, very steamy scenes, and violent themes. If you've read Storm the Gates (A Knight's Revenge Book 1) and want to see how Jolie's story continues, dive in!

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hey everyone! Not much to report here—if you read [Book 1](#) (Storm the Gates), then you're in the right place.

As I mentioned at the end of the last book, we're in multi-POV mode from here on out, so I hope you're ready to get to know Zach, Noah, and Bennett in these pages. I know they were a bit of a mystery until now!

The same content warnings as the last book apply here—scenes of violence and torture, general mayhem, discussion of sexual assault (but nothing ever depicted on page), lots of foul language, and explicit sex scenes including group sex.

Yes—more spice ahead! But strap in, team, because we have a lot to do before we get there.

I can't wait for you all to continue this journey with Jolie and her boys.

- Elizabeth

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PROLOGUE

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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.

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CHAPTER ONE

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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.

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CHAPTER TWO

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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.

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CHAPTER THREE

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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

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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-blond 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.

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CHAPTER FIVE

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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-blond 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.

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CHAPTER SIX

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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.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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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."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

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ZACH



“*S hit,*” 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-blond 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 Donovan 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

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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 towed 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?"

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CHAPTER TEN

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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

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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.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

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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.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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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.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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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

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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 Donovan’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

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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 tortoiseshell 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 wagging 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

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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.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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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 snugly 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 Donovan. 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 Donovan, “was *my* pull. I would like to make that clear.”

“You’re both a couple of pretty-boy pussies!” Donovan 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 Donovan off the floor again to drag him toward the torture section of the basement's open floor plan. Max grabbed Donovan'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 Donovan 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."

Donovan 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 Donovan’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 Donovan’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 Donovan'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 Donovan 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," Donovan 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 Donovan 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 Donovan’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,” Donovan 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 Donovan’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 Donovan. “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 Donovan’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

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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."

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CHAPTER TWENTY

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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 Donovan'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-blond 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

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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 Anzaldúa, 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

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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—invisible 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

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JOLIE



“F uck, 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."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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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

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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

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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-blond hair fell in soft waves around her face, and her makeup artist had done his, her, or their damndest 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."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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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 Serpents 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.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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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.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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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.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

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BENNETT



I t 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-blond 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 *tsked*, 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

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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."



Jolie and the boys' story will conclude in [Kill the King](#), Book 3 in the series—releasing in February!



Do you want a sneak peek of the Prologue and Chapter 1 of Kill the King, both from Zach's POV? Sign up for my [newsletter](#)!

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I'm sorry!! I know that cliff was worse than Book 1. But listen, Zach will be fine—I love him very much and would never put him through something he couldn't handle. It's all an adventure, yes? #zachwatch2023

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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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